Jemima Has Gone.

Chapter 1.

Adrian's thoughts were in turmoil as he walked down the country lane. His mental state had been like that a lot recently, and most rational people might regard that his mood was probably warranted. The last few months had been miserable and lonely. Miserable because he had had to adjust to his new and unwanted circumstances. Lonely because this change of circumstances meant that he spent a lot of time on his own, and the fact that he wasn't very good at being solitary made matters much worse.

Adrian had been brought up in a rural village as the only child of two doting parents. He was a little over six feet tall, with short, dark, wavy hair and intense blue eyes. He was thirty two years of age and had lived life to the full, the laughter lines and the near constant hint of a smile projecting an image of someone who a stranger would think was constantly in a good mood. His wide shoulders gave the impression of someone who possessed incredible strength, his muscle-bound physique being wrapped in neatly tailored shirts and suits during work hours, and figure-hugging designer apparel when he was at leisure. This wasn't because he was vain. Far from it. It was Jemima's influence.

His physical prowess had partly been built up over many years of strenuous activity in a gym. It had started during his time at a business college in a top university, and initially he had merely gone along to keep one of his friends company during his lengthy workouts. However, this sociable pastime took a serious turn as the months passed. He had been coached in the various techniques that were necessary to develop his frame as well as to avoid injury by a tutor who worked in the establishment.

In later times, Adrian often smiled as he reflected on how thankful he was that his sports hobby had morphed into something more focused. After about six months of training, the instructor had suggested that Adrian appeared to have many of the vital skills required to progress in the arts of boxing as well as Judo. Although his martial arts prowess in Judo never moved beyond the rudimentary elements, for the remaining two years, or so, of his time in academia he spent many hours in the ring, sparring with other enthusiasts under the instructor's watchful eye. The last year had been particularly exhilarating as he had been part of the team that competed against squads from other institutions.

At graduation he found that he had achieved the highest grade in his class, and thereafter swiftly joined the accounting training scheme of a large firm that was headquartered in the city where he now lived, toiling

for the standard three years in the external audit function whilst he speedily progressed through his professional exams. Shortly after completing them, he moved to his current department where he now worked as an international tax accountant, advising individuals about their personal affairs in this highly complex field.

His clients were an eclectic mix. Some were devoted to their families. Others were single and enjoyed hectic social lives in numerous but temporary relationships. Yet others eschewed romantic connections altogether, dedicating their time to their business affairs rather than those of the heart. Yet, they all had one thing in common. They were stinking rich, although the source of their wealth varied as widely as their personalities. Money had been acquired through inheritances, commercial activities or winning it in national competitions such as lotteries. However, Adrian treated every one of them with the same respect and high levels of competence. Indeed, many regarded him as a friend and he received numerous invitations to join them in the many exotic destinations they frequented.

However, despite having a life that many would regard as highly successful, for the moment, Adrian was off work due to ill health. It was Spring, but he didn't pay much attention to the keenness that nature displayed in announcing its emergence from winter's darkness. He'd been walking for a couple of hours, and the path that he was currently wandering down was lined with high earth banks that were covered in colourful flowers that vied with each other to spray their surroundings with delicious scent. The water droplets on the red, yellow, orange and blue petals that were the remnants from the light shower that had drenched the locality during the night glistened in the rays from the unseasonably warm sunshine. The trees whose branches waved in the gentle, temperate breeze rustled as the breaths of air touched the newly formed leaves as if to congratulate them for their recent birth. And beyond that, there were rich brown fields that showed signs of the farmer's exertions, and the crops that would dominate their existence until harvest returned them to their dormant state. Yet, Adrian was oblivious to all of this wonder. He appeared incapable of appreciating the bountiful neighbourhood that this countryside offered.

For the umpteenth time, he thought about the relationship he had enjoyed with Jemima. No, not relationship. That was too ordinary a word. The wonderful intertwining of hearts. Yes, that was more reflective of the intense period in his life that had still existed three months ago. Well, at least he had thought it was. He loved waking up next to her. He loved the way that her lip lapped a little more than normal over the top of the cup when she drank coffee. He loved the way a rebellious sprig of her hair always bounced around more freely than its compatriots. He loved the spontaneous glass of wine she would often have ready for him when he returned from work. And he absolutely loved the cuddles. Yes, especially

those. The feeling of holding so close the person that made him happy was amazing.

He had no doubt that she was widely regarded as beautiful, and he often found himself overwhelmed with emotion at being allowed to share such intimacy with her. Her long, shiny dark hair framed the classic lines of her aquiline nose and cheekbones. Behind her long lashes there were brown eyes that were so deeply dark and sensual that he felt that he could have dived into them and never needed to come up for air. Her long, slender and curvy body had been cultivated through a few hours a week spent in the local gym and was usually displayed to full effect in the carefully selected wardrobe of clothes she bought and wore.

Yet, it was her intellect that had initially won his heart in their very first meeting. She was a lawyer that specialised in international commercial law, and their separate employers had thrown them together to work on a particularly difficult scenario on behalf of one of his clients. The issue involved a business relationship in a foreign jurisdiction that had gone sour, and the legal and taxation aspects of separating the erstwhile trading partners had been so convoluted that the inter-disciplinary approach had been necessary. They had been locked together for several hours, progressing to a restaurant in the evening to continue their discussion of the problem. As the twilight hours dwindled into darkness, their business conversation morphed onto more personal matters, laughter dominating their emotions. A night spent together in her flat had commenced the three-year relationship.

There didn’t seem to be anything that Adrian could do to rid his mind of the memories of the incredible times he had shared with the woman that he had considered to be his soul mate. There was the occasion when they went into town on a dark and dreary winter’s day at the start of their joint fortnight vacation to do some clothes shopping, and on impulse bought a holiday leaving the next day for tropical climes. The weather in the far-off destination had been sweltering, the azure blue sea had been gorgeously warm and the locals so friendly that they had shared many fun evenings filled with laughter in various bars.

Then there was the moment they were passing a particular motorway junction late on a Friday night following a conference that they had both attended, and taken the decision to divert their car to the seaside resort. They whiled away the weekend on fun fair rides and in penny arcades. The hours in the bowling alley had started by Adrian teaching Jemima how to play the game, and ended in a fierce but friendly contest with a local couple, the winners being treated to a round of drinks in a nearby pub, the wood fire crackling and spitting in its effort to warm its customers.

And not to forget the time late on a Friday afternoon when Adrian had been contacted by a joint friend to inform him that she had contracted a

terminal illness, and was in the last few weeks of her existence. Adrian and Jemima's emotional bond had deepened even further during the week that they had taken off work so that they could provide the constant and intimate care to their friend prior to her inevitable transfer to the hospice.

However, the most cherished moments were spent in the restaurant around the corner from Adrian's flat. They had gone there so many times that the owner joked that they were part of the furniture. Yet, despite his teasing, they inevitably received a warm welcome and a complimentary glass of something delicious and alcoholic. And, regardless of how busy the establishment was, he always found them a table in a cosy corner where they could share loving conversations to plan their future together.

Although Jemima had retained her own apartment, they had commenced their joint lives together at his place because its central location provided easier access to both of their offices. However, that also made his single life more difficult now. Even though they had split three months ago, he still saw her image at the other side of the breakfast table, crunching on her toast and wrapping her lip over the edge of the cup that held the freshly brewed and aromatic coffee that he regarded as his speciality. He'd open a drawer to find one of her long dark hairs lying on top of an article, as if it was determined to continue his torture by forcing a vivid image of her into his grieving mind. He'd go through to the spare room that served as their office when they'd both needed to work at home, and remember the cosy hours they'd spent at the twin desks whose fronts abutted each other, occasionally looking up and sharing a smile.

He shook his head. Would he never be able to rid himself of the constant torment? He recalled the horror of the moment when he had discovered her infidelity. She'd been away at a conference for a few nights. Well, there was nothing unusual about that. People in their lines of work frequently indulged in such activities. He'd already been away twice this year. The gathering related to the new legal system being introduced in one of the smaller Commonwealth countries in the Pacific region, and Adrian remembered being impressed by the array of expert speakers who were due to address the assembly.

On the evening when she had returned home, they'd settled down to eat the meal that he'd prepared in advance. After the first course he'd taken the plates through to the kitchen whilst she enjoyed the particularly good wine he'd bought from the specialist vintner a couple of buildings away. He'd started to put the dessert into the dishes when the phone she'd left on the nearby counter pinged with a message. His glance at the machine's face showed that it was from someone called Doug, who Adrian assumed must be one of Jemima's colleagues. He didn't open the missive, and could only see the start of the first sentence, but that was enough. Doug expressed his wish that they could have shared another night together before resuming their lives with their separate partners.

Adrian decided not to mention the text until the following weekend as he wanted to give the situation further thought. After all, it might precipitously end their relationship if he accused her of something that hadn't happened. Maybe he'd misunderstood matters, and would have gained a different impression if he'd read the whole thing. Yet, he knew that he couldn't have intruded into her privacy in such an overt manner.

A chat with a close friend, Alan, decided the matter, although his chum's advice to confront Jemima head on merely confirmed what he had already thought. And now? Well, he deeply regretted his decision to raise the issue. It was possible that her romantic distraction could have blown over, and they might still be together. Instead, she had given him a long, sad and silent glance, risen from the table and after packing a few immediate belongings, had quietly closed the outer door behind her. When he had returned from work the following day it was clear that she had briefly come back to collect her remaining possessions, leaving her key and a brief note on the table that contained the words; "sorry it's come to this. Please be happy. I love you."

As he moved down the rural lane he sighed. Weird how so few words can bring about such a radical change in a person's life! And boy, had his life altered. Even last week, when he went for a drink with Alan, his pal had commented that Adrian's normal smile and happy demeanour had been replaced with a desolate countenance. Yes, that appeared to sum up his current existence. Desolate. And that seemed to apply to the present as well as the long and unending solitary future.

When a client, Elise, had discovered his single status, she had hinted that they might now be able to spend some time in each other's company, perhaps taking a trip in her private jet to a foreign clime where sand, sea and expensive restaurants vie for the attention of passers-by. Yet, despite the fact that he found her charming, and she was undoubtedly very attractive, he had politely but firmly refused the offer, saying that there had been a mistake and that he was still with his girlfriend. He had no desire to follow the example of colleagues who'd suffered following the conflict of interest that arises from a romantic liaison with a client.

The worst person he'd had to deal with, though, was Amanda, who had similarly hinted at them spending some of their leisure together. She was a colleague who worked in the neighbouring office cubicle to his own, and Adrian had been aware of her romantic interest in him since she had joined the firm two years ago. In fact, it hadn't been difficult to discern. He had seen the glances as he walked passed her door, and the longer than usual smiles as he entered a meeting room. And, of course, there were the Christmas staff parties where she danced with him or nearby, her hand frequently roaming onto one of his arms.

After a few weeks of persistent badgering he finally gave in and agreed. Amanda had mentioned that she had a friend who worked at the local concert venue who could obtain two tickets for a one-night performance by a famous rock group. Adrian had wondered if the physical intimacy involved in being in the audience of such a show where bodies are packed together for several hours would divert his thoughts to new amorous avenues. Yet, his mind had remained glued to the memories and sadness of his separation from Jemima after all.

And, now, here he was, staying in a hotel that had hosted his and Jemima's first and second anniversaries, walking down the same lane in which they had tightly clasped hands and stared into each other's eyes. They had selected it due to its isolated location so that they could devote both special occasions to each other, and the establishment had handsomely risen to the challenge. Following the warm welcome from the manager, they had found their room suffused with the delicious scents of multiple bouquets of colourful and stunning flowers and a massive bottle of champagne resting in an ice bucket next to the sumptuous four-poster bed.

His idea had been to take some time off work and revisit this old haunt to give his mind one last chance to wallow in the past. He had hoped that returning on his own to the place where he had shared such intimate times with Jemima might finally hammer her absence and his current solitary existence into his brain, and allow him to move on. What a crazy idea! To think that his ghouls would let him escape so easily. Instead of providing a resolution to his torment, it was actually making matters worse.

He knew that the lane he was progressing along was beautiful at this time of the year. Well, he should do. Both of the visits with Jemima had been during this season. The weather and flora and fauna had been equally glorious on both visits, just as it was now. It's only that his senses were dulled to the point of perceiving the world as an amorphous mass of grey instead of the multiple hues of bright colours that he was surrounded by.

He looked up to see a large boulder at the side of the path. Oh no, not that as well. He and Jemima had spent hours sharing that perch on their first trip to the area, their loving discussions and joint laughter dominating their intimate existences. Adrian approached the large rock, sat down and wondered if his mental tumult would ever end. He placed his head into his hands and let the tears stream down his face. It didn't take long for the sobbing to commence, and as he rested there his body started to shake with emotion.

"Hello. Are you OK?"

Adrian looked up and saw through his tear-filled eyes a female of about medium height and in her late twenties. Her figure was fairly shapely and slim. She had clearly been actively involved in sport at some stage in her life as she appeared to have a good muscle tone. Her long blond hair framed a face that was pretty, although not in the sense that models were expected to be. Her nose had a slight twist in it, and her lips were a bit fuller than those who normally earn their living on the catwalks. It was her eyes, though. They were so green. Adrian was reminded of the hue of freshly cut grass on a warm summer's day and how as a boy he had loved to wander over fields without any socks and shoes, feeling the blades tickle his toes and inculcate in him the joy of nature and life.

"Yes, thanks. It can't be every day you see someone in this isolated place who is crying. Sorry if I embarrassed you."

"I don't think you need to worry about that. You look like you've suffered a split with a girlfriend. You'd be surprised how many people I've encountered here in a similar condition. Someone must have advertised it as a suitable place for shedding tears. The number must run into the thousands. So, you see, it's not so isolated."

Adrian laughed. "Do you tease them all in such a heartless way?"

"Oh, yes," she said. "Definitely. It's the only amusement I get. Otherwise, my life is so dull, feeding the ducks to get them ready to be eaten. Scattering chicken feed to the feathered creatures to distract them so that I can steal their eggs more easily for breakfast. Filling the pigs' troughs to fatten them so they'll provide more bacon. I come along here every day partly to get some exercise, and partly for the entertainment."

Adrian laughed again. "Sounds like you've got a hard life, surrounded by such a copious variety of food. Do you single-handedly plough all the fields in the Spring and clear them at harvest time too?"

"You're being silly now," she replied. "I'm too busy eating all that meat to have the space in my calendar to do that stuff. I lure all of the emotionally tortured people I find in this lane back to the farmhouse I live in. When they've relaxed a little, they let their guard down and I give them a meal. Then I make them feel guilty for having deprived me of my food, and tell them they can make it up to me by doing all of the other chores. You'd be surprised how well my tactic works."

"I can see you're the very devil."

"Seriously, though," she said, "are you alright? I was doing some work on the hedges over there and heard your sobbing. You must be particularly upset to make a noise that carried to me over there. Have you split up with your partner?"

“Yes. It was a few months ago, but I can’t seem to move on. I thought that coming back to the place we used to share on our anniversaries might help, but it has only made things worse.”

“Now, that really was silly,” she answered. “Even a toddler would have had more sense than to try a stunt like that.”

“You don’t mince your words, do you? You’re right, of course. I can see how stupid I’ve been.”

“By the way, I don’t even know your name. I’m Lucy.”

Adrian stood up and they shook hands. “Pleased to meet you, Lucy. I’m an idiot, but I’m normally called Adrian.”

“Look, it’ll be starting to get dark soon. Have you got somewhere to stay?” she asked.

“Yes, I’ve got a room at the Courtney Arms for about a week. Jemima was my girlfriend and we used to stay there too.”

“It’s very expensive, and it’s clearly not doing you any good to remain there. Too many memories, by the sound of it. Why don’t you check out and come and stay with me? My father owns the farm and I used to share the main house, but I wanted a bit of independence so I was allowed to have one of the workers’ cottages. We used to employ quite a few men, but there aren’t any now as we use a lot of machinery instead, so it was vacant. It’s got two rooms and you can use the spare.”

Adrian looked at her for a few moments, his mind turning summersaults at such spontaneous kindness and sympathy.

“I’d really like that,” he whispered. “Are you sure I won’t be a nuisance?”

“You look like you could use the company, and I wouldn’t object to having someone around for a short while. It could be fun.”

“When shall I come round?”

“Now, if you want,” she replied. “We can go back to my cottage and get the jeep to collect your stuff, if you like.”

“I don’t know what to say.”

“You should say the same as the rest of the thousands I’ve met in this lane and invited back,” she responded with a slight smile. “You should say ‘yes, thank you’.”

“Okay,” he said. “Yes, thank you.”

Chapter 2.

Adrian stood in front of the kitchen sink, blindly looking out of the window. He was absent-mindedly drying the dishes from the meal that they had eaten, but his mind swirled randomly over the events in the hours since Lucy had turned up and whisked him away from his misery. There hadn't been any problem collecting his gear from the hotel. Admittedly, the last glance he'd given the room before he finally closed the door had caught his heart for a brief second. It was as if, in shutting the portal to the room where he and Jemima had shared incredibly emotional and important moments, he was leaving behind a piece of his ragged and torn heart.

As he turned the key in the lock and prepared to leave, he could see from the sympathetic look in Lucy's eyes that she understood the twinges of hurt and regret he was experiencing. To ease his sentimental passage from that world of passion to a new reality she opened her arms and pulled him to her. As he clung to her, the tears started to roll again and his body shook. Yet, this time, he could see a future without the female he had adored. Maybe. But at least there was hope now.

There was no problem in checking out, despite it being substantially earlier than the full duration of the booking. The receptionist merely said, "Sorry you're leaving, sir. I hope everything was satisfactory for you." And with that, Lucy led the way back to the car park.

They had arrived in her jeep, and that was a story in itself, he mused. It wasn't quite the vehicle that he had expected when she had first mentioned it to him. He had imagined a modern machine in good working order, albeit covered in mud, as might befit someone who needed a reliable motor to make sense of their life on the land. Instead, he was surprised to encounter something very different.

The first point was that it was old, and looked like it was about to collapse in a heap with the exhaustion of having had to fight a battle for existence for so many eons. As expected, it was completely caked in mud, but it took a couple of moments for Adrian to discern the other aspects that shaped his vision of this machine. It seemed to be lop-sided, the fact that one end of the straight line of the front bumper was higher than the other accentuating the impression.

The paint work was faded, some of it peeling slightly, leaving a touch of rust on the exposed metal. The front windscreen had a big crack running from the right-hand top corner for about six inches. However, the jeep's true condition became apparent when he climbed into the passenger seat. He closed the door and tried to put the safety belt on before Lucy started the engine, but there was no clip to connect it to.

When she noticed him searching for it, she said, “yes, that broke a couple of years ago. And you’ll need to take a firm hold of the string at your side, or the door might fly open if we hit a pothole.”

On seeing his surprise, she added, “well, I normally only drive it around the farm so it doesn’t matter what its bodywork is like. It’s the engine that’s important, and that’s sound.”

With that she put the key in the ignition and turned it. There was a spluttering, and then Lucy pressed the accelerator so that the revs climbed to stratospheric levels. She kept it like that for about two minutes, then looked at him and smiled. “We should be fine now. It’s warmed up. Off we go.”

The vehicle moved off down the rutted dirt track, and onto the main road. There was a lot of shaking and noise, but her prediction had been correct. They arrived at the hotel in one piece, albeit a little rattled. Once Adrian had checked out, he loaded his luggage into the boot of his own car, got into the driver’s seat and started the engine. The contrast between Lucy’s old jalopy and his own sleek car was palpable, the engine quietly purring as if to say I’m ready for whatever speed and conditions you want to throw at me.

As he stood at the sink, through the fading light he saw Lucy moving around outside, a bucket in either hand. She had told him that she needed to feed the hens and the pigs whilst he tidied the kitchen. She had planned to do it in the afternoon after she had finished her work on the hedge, but smiled as she complained that the racket that Adrian had been making when he was sitting on the boulder had distracted her.

His mind roved onto Lucy and how she had behaved. Despite the rough teasing, she had been very gentle and had made him a cup of coffee when they had initially got back to her cottage. After she had plonked the mug on the table in front of him, he had raised it to his lips, and winced. It was the instant variety rather than the more sophisticated version he was used to. Her laugh at his reaction to the hot liquid was typical of her outwardly casual approach to life, and in his discomfort he had tried to excuse himself for his ungrateful attitude.

He put the last dish away in the cupboard, wandered through to the lounge and sank into one of the comfy chairs in front of the roaring fire. The flames licked up as if they were in a competition to see which of them could reach the highest point of the chimney, and the crackling provided a reassuring background narrative that he imagined had been enjoyed by the numerous generations of the cottage’s inhabitants in the many years it had housed farm workers.

There was a small table between the two seats, on which there was a bottle of brandy and two tumblers. He smiled as he looked at the brand.

It was from the cheaper end of the range of that kind of alcohol, but it's forty percent volume would have the requisite effect nevertheless. He sat back and watched the reflection from the blaze on the bottle, which gave an impression that the liquid was enjoying a dance inside its glass prison.

At that moment Lucy appeared and dropped into the cushions opposite him, which immediately wrapped themselves around her lithe body. "Sorry to keep you waiting," she said. "I was mucky so I've had a quick shower and put on some fresh clothes."

"So I see. Showers always refresh me, no matter what I've been up to."

"I'm surprised you haven't started on the bottle. I assume you want some?"

She reached over and poured two generous measures, leant back again and took a swig. Adrian picked his glass up and took a similar gulp, and sighed as he felt his senses dulled under the influence from the liquor.

"Sorry that the brand is cheap, but I can't afford the expensive stuff."

"Oh, that's fine. It all has the same effect," he replied. "Look, I wanted to thank you for taking me in and looking after me like this."

"Oh, that's okay. I could see how miserable you were and thought I'd better do my good Samaritan act. Actually, it's quiet around here most of the time, so I'll be glad of the company."

"Did I really look that pathetic?"

"Yes, you really did, but you look much better now. Obviously, a hot meal in such salubrious surroundings has done you the world of good. It's clear that this eatery is much better for people's health than top restaurants. Maybe I should market it. I could take in all the waifs and strays and make a living out of it. Then I wouldn't need to get so mucky doing the farm work. How long are you on holiday for?"

"My boss has given me two weeks leave but I don't think he'll complain if I have more time off. You see, I've made the firm a great deal of money and I think he could see that I was so depressed that my health might suffer if he didn't let me have a long enough vacation to properly recover."

"You must be very important," she replied.

"No, not more than any of my colleagues, but he could already see that my mental state had suffered a great deal after Jemima left me. My performance was sliding a little, and unless he allowed me an extended break, I would probably have got burned out completely. Then I wouldn't

be able to make them any more money. Simple economic equation, you might call it, I guess."

"Yes, I can see that. We don't have the luxury of having time off. The animals still have to be fed, and the crops will rot in the fields if they're not harvested in time."

"I'd not thought of that. It puts my professional life into context. It seems rather irrelevant compared to yours."

"What do you do?"

Adrian went a little red. "I'm an accountant. I spend every day in an air-conditioned office with a coffee machine down the corridor and a staff cafeteria on the floor below. You must think me very pampered compared to the work you do."

"No, I don't think that," she answered. "But why do you insist on putting yourself down? I'm sure that you've worked hard to get where you are, and you've clearly gained a lot of success. I mean, look at that car you've got. I don't think I could ever afford something that expensive, even if I saved all my pennies for the rest of my life."

"And yet you do real things. On real land. With real animals that feed real humans. My existence is full of meetings in heated rooms, discussing theoretical concepts to save clients a little more money so that the government doesn't take too much of their huge wealth in taxes. It seems so fake."

"Was Jemima your first girlfriend?"

"I guess she was. I had a few short-term romances at university, and thought at the time that each one of them was serious. Then something would happen and I'd find a new girl. All my friends, male and female, were doing the same thing, so I considered it to be normal. But, of course, when I met Jemima, I knew differently. What about you?"

"I've only had one serious relationship. It started when I was twenty. He was a worker on the neighbouring farm and was a few years older than me. Our first dates were in the pub near the hotel you were staying in."

"Yes," he said. "I noticed that. It looks very nice."

"It can be, but not on Friday and Saturday evenings. That's when the local labourers have had their weekly wage and come in to spend it. Fights start and end, and the lads laugh for the rest of the time about the bruises they've given each other. But one of them, a chap called Leo, started to try to get me to go into the toilets with him for a bit of fun, as he put it. I was there to enjoy some time with my girlfriends and they

tried to push him away, but that didn't work. He started getting quite threatening. That's when Juke came over and hit Leo. Leo went down, and banged his head on the stone flags on the floor. I guess he expected that to give him some sort of rights over me, and I didn't mind at the time. He was very good looking.

"Everyone else around here has been to school together, but I didn't know him." She went silent for a moment, and Adrian kept quiet as she was obviously lost in thought. "I had a dreadful time there. At school, I mean. You know. Bullying."

She seemed to shake herself out of her malaise, and continued. "Anyway, it turned out that he'd just moved to the area for work. We had a few dates and I convinced myself that I loved him. That's the reason that I persuaded my parents to let me have this cottage. Juke and I moved in and I thought things were going fine for about seven years. He would go off to work in the morning, and in the evening we'd have a meal and sit in front of the fire till bed time."

"You must have got through a lot of timber."

Lucy laughed. "It all came from the branches that the storms knock off the trees on the farm. We really do have a lot of trees here."

"Sorry, I interrupted you."

"Well, I guess most of the evenings were cosy, but he still went to the pub with his mates on Fridays and Saturdays. After seven years of living together, one of my friends told me that Juke had been fooling around with other girls on those times. I think all the lads did, actually, so Juke wasn't any different. But I wasn't happy with it, and threw him out. I found out through another of my friends that he left the area shortly afterwards. I don't know where he is now."

"I'm really sorry. That sounds really rough," said Adrian.

"It was. I was quite depressed and lost my confidence for quite a while. So, when I saw you sitting on that boulder, sobbing your heart out, I think I instinctively sympathised with you. Well, that and the fact that you're good looking too."

"Thanks. You're not so bad looking yourself. Very pretty, actually."

They gazed at each other for a while, sipping their drinks, then Adrian said, "look, I can't just stay here without contributing something. Is there anything I can do around the place to earn my keep?"

"Now you mention it, I think there is. You could help my father. He's having some difficulties with his accounts, and would have had to pay

someone to fix things. Maybe you could have a look at his books, and see if you could straighten them out."

"Is there nothing else? That doesn't seem like very much."

"Yes. If you really want to pay your way, you could stay with me in my room and keep me company."

Adrian smiled. "Have you got two beds in there? I wouldn't have thought there was room for more than one in a cottage this size."

"Exactly."

"Oh, I see," he replied. "My depressed mind is obviously being slow tonight. Have you got a double bed?

Lucy's eyes showed a hint of amusement. "Of course. It's not a big one, but it'll cope with us both. Very cosy. Shall we go up now? I think we've had enough alcohol to warm us up."

Chapter 3.

Lucy's father put the two mugs of steaming tea onto the table, and went back to the counter to fetch his own. They were sitting at a large, solid table in Lucy's father's home. Adrian looked around the room. There was the Aga cooker sitting against the far wall, emitting a low heat from the wood that was being consumed inside it. Next to that were a range of dark floor-mounted units with similarly shaded cupboards on the walls. It was clear that the windows hadn't been cleaned for a long time as they were caked in dirt, presumably from the tractors and other machinery that frequently drove passed en route to one chore or another. Obviously the walls had originally been painted in white, but the decoration was now a tone of cream, illustrating the length of time that had elapsed since they had received any attention. Yes, thought Adrian, a cosy and well lived-in house.

Adrian had met Lucy's father when she took him across to her childhood home about half an hour ago. "This is my father, Shaun," Lucy said.

Adrian and Shaun shook hands and then all three of them sat down. "I don't know if Lucy told you, but I live here on my own. My wife, Veronica, died a few years ago. It's a bit big for me now that Lucy has moved out, but I couldn't imagine living anywhere else."

Adrian smiled. "I can understand that. And I can believe that it's quite comforting to have reminders of her."

"Yes. It is." Shaun's demeanour was despondent and he coughed, apparently in embarrassment. "Sorry, I find it difficult to talk about Veronica. I don't think I'll ever recover from losing her."

His face suddenly changed as he gave a slight smile. "Lucy told me what you do for a living. I don't suppose you'd be able to have a look at my accounts. I think they're in a bit of a mess."

"That's an understatement," said Lucy. "They need major surgery to resuscitate them."

Adrian laughed. "It would be a pleasure. It's the least I can do after all of the kindness I've been shown. Actually, I think I might enjoy it. I've not tackled that kind of accounting work for quite a while. I've been involved in advising clients on their tax affairs more recently."

"I would be most grateful," answered Shaun. "But Lucy also mentioned the problems you've had in your private life. I'm sorry to hear about that. A very unpleasant thing to happen, I'm guessing, although I've never suffered from an unfaithful partner, personally. But Lucy's had a rough time of it. I never liked Juke, and I was glad to see the back of him. The

young lads around here can be a bit rough when they've had too much to drink, but they're mostly okay. But Juke was scum. Lucy probably hasn't told you, but in addition to being unfaithful, he used to beat other locals up when they were drunk after leaving the pub, and then he'd take their money. He even burgled the homes of some elderly villagers. That's the reason he disappeared so suddenly. The police were looking for him. I think she'll be alright now that you've taken her under your wing."

Adrian looked at Lucy and smiled. "Well, she might be okay, if I can persuade her to ditch that dodgy jeep. It seems like a death trap to me."

"Yes, I worry about it too. I've even offered to buy her another vehicle, but she refuses to exchange it. Maybe you'll have more luck."

Lucy laughed. "You two are terrible. I'm quite happy with my jeep, thank you. Just as well, as Adrian and I will need it this afternoon when we go up Senzar Hill. I want to show him the view."

"Yes," replied Shaun. "It's spectacular from up there, although I haven't been to its summit for quite a long while. I never seem to have the time." He looked at Adrian. "It's well worth the trip."

"I'm looking forward to it." Adrian smiled again. "It's better than being trapped on the farm with this harridan who keeps bossing me about."

A shoe quickly connected with his shin, and he gave a wince of pain. "Serves you right for insulting your boss," exclaimed Lucy. "Now that you two have had your tea, I think we'd better go before Adrian gets even more cheeky."

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"Coming up that road was painful," said Adrian. "I felt every bump, and I thought we might have to get out and push. I didn't think an engine could make such strange noises."

"Much as it pains me to say it, you might have a point," replied Lucy. "The jeep just about managed to cope around the farm last winter, with all the snow we had, but it seems to have gone downhill a lot recently."

"I imagine that's all it's good for now; going downhill."

She pulled into a corner of the car park that had come into sight when a gap in the constant lines of hedgerows appeared, and yanked the hand brake on. "Do you want another kick on the shins? Anyway, let's forget that for now. There's a little passage through the bushes over there, but the thickets are very good at hiding it. I know the way, so follow me. I want to show you the view."

They got out of the vehicle. Adrian tried to close his door, but it bounced open again. “I think you’d better slam it,” she said. “That usually works.”

As they moved off, she grabbed his hand, and pushed her way through the undergrowth, eventually stopping on a ledge on the other side of the coppice. “What do you think of that?” she asked.

Adrian stood silently for a moment, taking in the vista. “It’s truly breathtaking,” he said.

Below the rocky outcrop they were standing on, there was a sheer drop of several hundred feet, to a slow incline made up of scree, or little loose stones. Beyond that, the fields went on for several miles, patches of brown, red and black soil intermingling to look like the kind of countryside depicted in the tapestry samplers that ladies used to produce in by-gone eras. The green hedges and trees partitioned the earth into boxed segments, the variegated height, and the grazing sheep and birds that eked out a living in the shrubbery turning a quiet pastural scene into a haven of natural splendour.

In the distance, he could just about make out the town which Lucy had mentioned was where the regular, local farmers’ market was held. It looked like the type of typical conurbation that had decorated the English landscape for centuries, the church steeple standing guard over the lower levels of brown roofs. A slight haze hung over the settlement, producing a scene that might have come out of a deep, mythical past in which King Arthur’s wise rule guided the nation.

The sun cast a bright glow over the panorama, its rays bouncing off the windscreens of distant, slow-moving vehicles that were cautiously making their way along windy, narrow lanes. As Adrian glanced up, he saw whisps of cloud meandering passed as if they were on holiday and enjoying a leisurely stroll. Certainly, he thought, the wind must be colder at that high altitude, compared to the warm, gentle air that was sauntering around the headland.

He looked at Lucy. “This is truly beautiful. It all looks so calm. If I were to view the city I live in from a similar height, all I’d see would be people scrabbling around, their heads occupied with their everyday worries, and in a hurry to reach the next point in their calendar so that they could do something else that would increase their stress.”

Lucy smiled and briefly squeezed his hand. “I wanted to share this with you. It’s very special to me. As a kid, I used to come here at weekends to try and forget the bullying. I rarely saw anyone, but my mother used to make me a picnic and sometimes I’d stay all day. And when mum was killed in the car crash, I came here even more. It felt as if I could be with her in this isolated place. I used to sit on that outcrop of rocks over there for hours on end.”

“I could stay here forever,” he said. “I can see why you would find some peace here. Thank you for sharing it with me. Let’s go over and sit for a while.”

They wandered towards it, Adrian settling on the largest boulder, Lucy sitting on his knees. “I didn’t have anywhere like this when I was young,” he said. “Our village was pretty, but all of the surrounding area was flat. At weekends I used to knock around with a small group of boys, and I suppose we could have climbed trees to give us a view, but we never thought of that. We were too busy doing things like throwing sticks up to dislodge the conkers so we could use them for one of our games, or playing football with a scruffy old ball that had been previously owned by the father of one of my friends when he was young.”

“Yes, I used to see some of the boys trying to remove the conkers in the autumn. I never understood the attraction of it. I was quite happy up here. Mind you, my friend, Helen, sometimes came up with me and we’d pretend that a couple of handsome men would come along and whisk us away. No-one turned up, of course. Well, until you came along.”

“And you were the fair damsel, were you?” teased Adrian, and they both laughed. “I suppose the screen of bushes and trees that we had to come through from your jeep hides this little space, so that not many people know about it. You and Helen wouldn’t be disturbed up here by the boys that tormented you. I can see that would have been even more important as a sanctuary for you.”

“Yes, that’s true. Now, look. I’ve got a surprise for you,” she announced.

“Didn’t you surprise me enough last night in bed?”

Lucy frowned. “No, not that kind. I’ve brought a picnic. Sandwiches, some jelly and a couple of bottles of orange juice. If you wait here, I’ll go and get it all.”

Adrian pulled her towards him, and they shared a lingering kiss. “I think the main meal can wait. As no-one comes here, we shouldn’t be disturbed. I’d like to have my appetiser first.”

“Oh, have you brought a picnic too?” she asked.

“Yes, it’s sitting on my knee. And very delicious it is too.”

“Oh, that kind of starter. Well, in that case, we’d better go over there where we’ll get less mucky.”

Adrian laughed.

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As he waited on Lucy returning to the table with the drinks, Adrian reflected on the remainder of the day. On the way home, Lucy had wanted to stop at this pub, saying it would be a lovely end to a lovely day. He immediately agreed, and smiled as the jeep groaned at having its steering wheel yanked round to enter the car park. And, of course, she was right. It had been a wonderful day. The picnic had consisted of thick wedges of bread, between which there were tender and tasty slices of various types of meat. Little plum tomatoes added a sweetness, and the strawberry jelly was delicious. Well, not as good as the 'nibble' they'd shared before starting the meal.

He looked around the room. It certainly had a great deal of character. The fire in the grate crackled away as if it was enjoying a little joke of its own, and he had to admit that its warmth was very welcome. A chill had descended on the area due to the sun taking a rest from its daily toil and the moon commencing its shift. There were the usual bench seats against the walls, with small tables nearby, atop which were the obligatory mats to stop liquid spilling onto the wooden surface, and which all advertised the brewery that owned the establishment. It's corporate insignia of roaring flames on a background of a sheath of wheat certainly aptly matched its name; 'The Fiery Mill Brewery'. Then there was the customary beer-stained carpet, its original vibrant red colour having turned into a mottled brown over the years. The bar against which Lucy was leaning, laughing as she shared a joke with the barman, was a dark brown with about half a dozen hand pull taps, and behind which were the normal array of higher strength liquors.

Yes, it was no different from any other he had frequented, except for one thing. Lucy had divulged en route from the jeep to the main door that she used to come in here on Sundays with her parents when she was a kid. Admittedly, it was under the pub's previous ownership, but they had served excellent meals at that time of the week, and it had given her mother a break from the kitchen in which she incessantly toiled, which of course was in addition to her work on the farm.

Lucy arrived a moment later, and they clinked their glasses. "I never thought I'd meet someone special again," said Adrian. "I was in such a dark place, and you've rescued me. Thank you."

"Well, how could I ignore such a pathetic figure in that lane. You were shedding so many tears that I thought you might flood the whole area. I had to do something to safeguard our farm."

"Ah, the original Lucy back." They both laughed. "Here's to us, and I'd like to propose a toast to our futures in the hope that they'll be together."

"Yes," said Lucy. "I'd like that. Very much. Here's to us."

The clink from the glasses was loud enough to disturb the drinkers at the next table, who looked up and rolled their eyes at each other. *More young love*.

Chapter 4.

As he climbed out of the jeep, Adrian looked up and down the village street. He smiled. It was certainly very pretty. The road was lined with old cottages, their attractive character being enhanced by their rickety roof tiles and the plumes of white, aromatic wood smoke floating freely out of a few chimneys. About half way along the thoroughfare, there was what appeared to be a village shop, which had the usual red sign projecting outwards that advertised that the establishment also incorporated a post office. There was a quiet serenity that pervaded the whole vista. A tranquil and safe place to live, he thought; perhaps one in which neighbours' lives had been intimately entwined with each other for eons.

Lucy slammed her door in the hope that it would remain closed. "This is a beautiful place," said Adrian. "It's very different from the city I live in. That's a sea of concrete, where the greenery of nature is dominated by the belching fumes of the roaring traffic."

"I know," she replied. "I sometimes forget how lucky I am to live here, but I get a rude reminder on the few occasions I go into town."

"I shouldn't have been so surprised at how charming English villages can be. After all, I grew up in one. I guess I've become too accustomed to the city now."

"Don't you go back to your parents at all?"

"Not really," he answered. "It's so far. I have a spare room. It's easier for them to come to me as they're retired now, and they go on holiday a lot."

"Well, come on. I have to get this posted," she said, brandishing an envelope. "It needs a stamp, and I'd like to have a chat with the couple that run the shop as well. I've known them since I was a girl.

The usual little bell that was attached to the top of the door tinkled to give a warning that customers had entered the premises. It was very homely and welcoming, thought Adrian. Not unlike the one in the village in which he had grown up, in fact. He could almost imagine Mr and Mrs Gresham, who had run it all of those years ago when he was a young boy, suddenly appearing and giving their usual kindly greeting. They had seemed immortal, and yet a mere four years after he had left to attend university, Mr Gresham had died of a heart attack, and his wife had suffered an emotional breakdown as a result. One of Mr Gresham's brothers had helped to sell the business so that Mrs Gresham could move into a care home to receive the intensive support that she consequently needed.

He looked around the premises that Lucy had brought him to. As you entered, you were met with a mixture of aromas that emanated from the wide variety of products that were displayed on the shelves that ran down the middle of the interior. Always the same, he mused. Soup and biscuits mingled with hand cream and shampoo, with the milk and other cold items being stored in an open-fronted chiller unit that was positioned to one side. Next to that was a dark wooden counter that was dominated by an old-fashioned till and a rack of the chewy sweets that are beloved of small kids.

An elderly gentleman appeared from a back room, and stood next to the till and smiled. He had neatly parted grey hair, was of medium physique, and had a small pot belly and kindly eyes. “Not seen you for a few days. How’s your father?”

“He’s fine, thanks, Mr Aitken,” replied Lucy. “He’s out on the tractor most of the time at the moment, getting the seeds into the ground. I know he enjoys that. It keeps his mind occupied.”

“Yes, all the farmers around here are doing that too. Let’s hope this good weather lasts.”

Lucy nodded and moved onto the Post Office section, which was at the opposite end of the shop to the front door. There was a counter of light wood that reached up to about waist height, and the large glass window that stretched from that level to the ceiling had a hole in it to ease the passing of items between the customer and the lady that was serving behind it. Adrian glanced at her. This was clearly Mrs Aitken. Her long grey hair was tied in a bun at the back of her head and her pince-nez glasses hung from a thin chain round her neck, but it was her dark brown eyes that Adrian noticed. He shuddered. They were the same shade as Jemima’s. He tried to fight back the tears as the memories threatened to overcome him. *Would he never be immune to such chance reminders?*

Mrs Aitken’s voice returned his mind to the present as her voice pierced through his psychological torment. “Hello, my dear. I’d heard that you’d found a new chap. Is this him? He certainly seems a lot better than that Juke.”

Lucy mockingly rolled her eyes. “I’ll never get used to the speed that gossip travels around here. Yes, it seems that his previous girlfriend abandoned him in a local lane; a bit like fly-tipping, really. When I noticed him, I grabbed a spade and a bucket to scoop him up so that I could dispose of him, but when I noticed how goodlooking he was, I changed my mind and decided to keep him after all. I display him in mum’s old glass cabinet in the lounge. Dad let me borrow it, you see.”

Mrs Aitken laughed. “Yes, I tried that with Ron, and it was alright for a while till his pot belly grew too large to fit in there anymore. Now I

display him over there by the till. It keeps him out of trouble. Anyway, what would you like?"

"I need to send this card to my cousin. It's her birthday soon."

"Okay, pass it through to me and I'll put it into the bag for the postman to take when he comes later." She looked at the address, and glanced up quickly. "Oh, is she still in that refuge? It's terrible what her husband did to her."

"Yes, she doesn't seem to be able to recover from all those years of psychological control and abuse she suffered from him. You know how he refused to let her get a job? Well, we discovered recently that he used to spend most of his wages down the pub, and then still expected her to provide his food. If she didn't, he threatened to beat her. She was terrified, so she borrowed loads of money. When he left her for the barmaid in his local, she was heavily in debt."

Mrs Aitken sighed. "That's terrible. What happened?"

"When dad found out, he rang the bank that she owed it all to, and explained everything."

"Did they let your cousin off?"

Lucy shook her head. "Not at first, but after dad provided some evidence, they reluctantly wrote it all off."

Mrs Aitken pretended to look serious. "Much as I joke about Ron, he's a good man. He'd never do that to me."

Lucy laughed. "I can't imagine that you'd let him. And he's such a sweetheart. When I came in here with my friend Helen after school when I was a girl to buy some sweets with my pocket money, he used to wink and slip a few extra ones in for free."

"He thinks I don't notice, but I know he's still doing that. Actually, it works very well. The kids go home and tell their parents, who then do some of their shopping in here instead of going to the supermarket in town. A friend of ours, Dolly, runs the Post Office and shop in Harcombe…"

"Oh, yes, I know where you mean," interrupted Lucy. She turned to explain to Adrian. "It's a village about five miles away. My friend Helen's parents used to live there."

"That's it, dear," continued Mrs Aitken. "Dolly's on her own now. Her Joe died a couple of years back of a stroke and she's been struggling since. Joe used to give some extra sweets to the kids when he was alive, but she

doesn't do that. It means that her customers spend much less each time they go in there nowadays, and she's really finding it difficult."

"You really are wily," answered Lucy, as she handed over the money for the stamp. "I always thought Mr Aitken gave us the sweets because he was just a nice man."

Mrs Aitken smiled. "Well, he is that too."

"I didn't know that Joe had died," answered Lucy. "I always thought they were really close."

"They were. They were married forty eight years, and ran the shop for the last thirty five. They didn't have any children. So, she's all alone."

"That's very sad, replied Lucy. "How does she cope on her own?"

"She's got no other family. Joe was everything to her. The shop's all she's got left."

"I thought that she had a cousin somewhere?"

"Yes," replied Mrs Aitken. "Dolly is too timid to contact him, but I've got his details somewhere. We met him when he visited Joe and Dolly on holiday some years ago and she asked us over for an evening meal. I think I might contact him to see if he can offer Dolly any help. He seemed really nice."

"Poor lady. All that time together too. Forty eight years seems like an eternity to me."

"It is. Ron and I have been together for fifty five. I really don't know what I'd do without the old duffer. Will you be taking your young man to the farmers' market? It's on in a couple of days."

"Yes, that's the plan. He's such a townie, and probably doesn't know one end of a cow from the other, so I thought that the least I could do would be to educate him a little."

Adrian pretended to be offended. "That's not strictly true," he said. "I know my way around a cow, especially when I'm eating it in a good restaurant."

"Would it surprise you to learn that steaks started off with four legs, a head and a tail and only became sufficiently large enough to provide your meal by munching their way through tons of grass?" said Lucy sternly.

They all laughed. "We'd better go now," said Lucy. "I want to take him to see the river."

“Yes, it should be nice at this time of the year,” responded Mrs Aitken. “The view from the bridge is lovely.”

They all said goodbye, and Lucy and Adrian went out into the street. “They’re a lovely couple. Just like the ones in the Post Office where I grew up,” said Adrian.

“Yes. Actually, in the summer, Mr Aitken sometimes gave Helen and me an ice cream. I didn’t want to mention that to Mrs Aitken as well. And he used to tease us about being pretty and that he was sure that we’d have loads of boyfriends when we got older.”

“Well, he was right there. You are very pretty.”

The voice interrupted them. “I ‘eard you’d taken up wiv anuver chap. I told Juke I’d check on you till he gets back. When will you get it into your fick skull that you belong to ‘im?”

Adrian looked at the man who was holding a large knife, the blade stretching upwards from the handle for about twelve inches, and culminating in a sharp point. Adrian estimated that he was about thirty five, and had dark brown, greasy hair that cascaded over the collar of his leather jacket and down to his scruffy jeans. He had a strange physique, his wide shoulders and bulging arm muscles contrasting with the beady blue eyes that sat within an unusually small head.

“Oh, leave us alone, Matt” said Lucy. “Juke left here some time ago. If you remember, he had to as the police were after him. It’ll be a long time till he can come back, and even then the police will arrest him.”

“That’s got nuffing to do wiv you, and it doesn’t change anyfing. You belong to ‘im, and I’m ‘ere to make sure you wait for ‘im.” He looked at Adrian. “So, you can bugger off, and crawl back to the shithole you came from.”

Adrian looked at Lucy and sighed. “He really shouldn’t have said that.” Matt’s face changed from one of aggression to a surprised look as Adrian moved swiftly forward, his left arm shooting out and sending the knife spinning into the nearby gutter at such speed that it stunned the thug, who blankly watched it fly away. There was a cracking sound as Adrian’s right fist connected to Matt’s jaw with such immense force that he gave a yell of pain. Adrian then leaned against Matt’s body, putting his foot behind his foe’s so that as he pushed his adversary backwards, the man tripped and fell to the ground with a thud, striking his head on the tarmac.

“Maybe you might wish to consider apologising to Lucy, although it seems unlikely that someone with your tiny brain will ever be able to

grasp the need to do so. In the meantime, if I ever see you trying to harass her again, I won't be so gentle. Now scuttle back to the grimy little dump you crept out of."

Matt gurgled as he tried to speak in response, but his broken jaw prevented it.

When Adrian turned round to look at Lucy, he saw that she was trembling. "You shouldn't have done that," she whispered. "The next time, he might come back with his friends."

He put his arm around her as they walked to her jeep. "I'll deal with that when it happens. In the meantime, I think I should drive you home. You look too shaky for anything else." He smiled. "As it's not long since we drove here, I don't think I'll need to rev the engine to warm it up."

She pretended to hit him on his chest. "Do you want me to kick you in the shins again for criticising my jeep? I thought you'd learned your lesson."

He laughed. "Obviously not. Maybe you need to punish me more. When we get home, you can get some practice in? I just hope the bed is strong enough!"

"I guess there's only one way to find out," she replied.

"That's better," said Adrian. "It seems that the prospect of inflicting punishment on someone inevitably cheers you up. But you still look a bit shaky. Shall we go over to the little coffee shop across the street? It'll give you time to calm down."

She was quiet for a moment, then gave him a quick kiss. "Yes, that's a good idea. I'd hate my father to see me like this. I know he worries about me. I don't want to make him feel even more anxious. And I haven't been in there since my mother died, so I can't remember what their drinks are like. I wonder if they're as good as the ones you make me for breakfast."

Chapter 5.

Once more, Lucy parked the jeep at the side of the road, and they both climbed out. Adrian looked along the street to see that they were at the opposite end to where they had left the vehicle the other day when they had gone into the Post Office. The houses that lined the road here were very similar, except for one. It stood alone at the end of a row of properties, and at the start of the slight rise that led to the bridge. It was octagonal in shape, and above the door there was a plaque that proclaimed its date of construction to have been two hundred and fifty years ago. Certainly, the small garden that wrapped around the dwelling was very well maintained, the hedges being neatly trimmed and the grass well-manicured. The profusion of reds, yellows, oranges and blues of the flowers made a delightful vista, and Adrian thought that it would provide a wonderful place to relax on a warm, sunny day.

He turned his gaze to the direction Lucy was headed. The bridge was definitely of some vintage, and as he neared it, he saw that a similar date to the cottage had been etched into the stonework. There was just enough room for two cars to pass each other if the drivers were very careful, and he estimated the structure to be about a hundred feet in length.

“It’s lovely, isn’t it?” said Lucy.

“Yes, I can see why you wanted to bring me here.” He pointed to a nearby building. “Presumably that octagonal property was the toll house where travellers handed over their fare so that they could be allowed to cross the bridge.”

“Yes,” she replied. “If you look on the pillar by the entrance gate, it’s still got the amounts that had to be paid for different kinds of vehicles. I think it was a farthing for pedestrians.”

“It’s a long time since you could buy anything for a quarter of a penny.”

They wandered to the middle of the span and looked over the edge. Adrian saw that buildings lined the river on each side, but that they were set back quite some distance. The intervening ground was covered in a variety of bushes and trees that seemed intent on acquiring ascendancy over their rivals, either in a vertical competition to reach for the light, or a horizontal one to dominate the water’s edges. Tendrils floated away in the direction he was gazing, the current seemingly trying it’s best to detach them from their host plants in order to have some company as it flowed towards the impersonal sea many miles away. White and yellow flower heads were interspersed amongst the green foliage, and the gentle whoosh of the leaves of the many shrubs in the light breeze added to the serene vista.

“I love coming here,” said Lucy.

“I can see why. It’s beautiful.”

“It is, but when I was young, I particularly liked the calm. It’s another place where I used to escape to when the torment of the bullying at school got too much. When the leaves rustled like they are now, I felt as though they were my friends and were talking to me. It almost seemed that they were giving me their sympathy.”

Adrian moved closer to her and put his arm around her shoulders for a moment, and gave her a squeeze. “And now I’m doing the same.”

“I feel so safe when I’m with you.”

“Hello Lucy,” said the man who was walking past. Adrian glanced up and saw a gentleman of about sixty years, his flat tweed cap covering neatly cropped grey hair. The sharp look from his blue eyes gave a clear impression of intelligence and the red, rugged cheeks of someone who spent a great deal of time outdoors. That notion was supported by his slightly dirty jeans that were tucked into green wellingtons. A black labrador dog was at the other end of the lead that he held. However, Adrian couldn’t avoid noticing the chap’s neatly cut moustache and that his stature was very erect, and wondered if he had a military background.

“Hello, Mr Welham,” replied Lucy. “How’s your wife?”

“She’s much better, thanks. We were all worried that she wouldn’t recover from that virus, but I made her follow the doctor’s orders to the letter. How’s Shaun?”

“He’s okay, thanks. He’s out sowing at the moment. He has his low moments, but I think he’s managing to cope much better. It’s been a while since mum died, and he’s moved through most of his grieving. Of course, he still misses her.”

“Bound to, after being married for all of those years. I remember when they first met at school. In the last year, just after the exams. Well, I’d better be off before Looney here starts moaning.”

Lucy turned round to look at the river again. “He used to help dad when mum died,” she said to Adrian. “He often popped round to see if there was anything he could do, like the shopping or feed some of the animals. Once, he even took the tractor out and did some of the harvest.”

“Oh, is he a farmer? He looked like he might have been in the army.”

Lucy sighed. “Yes, he was. He grew up on his parents’ farm, but joined the army after leaving school. I remember him coming home on leave, and he used to help them out. He really enjoyed his time away and rose to the rank of major, but his father died when he was only in his late fifties, so he left the military and came back to run everything. I think he still misses his old life, though.”

“The daughter of one of my parents’ neighbours joined the army when I was in my teens. She loved it as well. I used to bump into her sometimes when she was back and she’d tell me a little about it. I think she worked as a medic. She was posted to one of the war zones overseas, and was killed whilst trying to rescue a critically wounded soldier. I think she was shot by the enemy.” Adrian looked sad for a moment. “She was awarded a medal, but that was no consolation to her parents.”

Lucy leaned over and gave Adrian a kiss. “You really are a very sensitive person. I guess that’s one of the many things that’s causing me to fall for you.”

He kissed her back. “I think it’s your dreadful sense of humour that’s having the same effect on me. Well, that, and your jeep. The way you have such a deep bond with that old jalopy is really endearing.”

Lucy gave him a gentle shove. “I’ve warned you not to criticise my jeep. I’ll have to devise a new torture to punish you with.”

Their conversation was interrupted by the sound of a loud motorbike that was roaring its way up the village’s main road. “That’ll be Hendrick. He’s another one of Juke’s friends, and he’s really nasty. He’s already been to jail for five years for beating someone up.”

The noise grew as the bike got nearer, and turned onto the bridge. It headed straight for Lucy.

“Watch out,” shouted Adrian, and after he had pushed her backwards, he side-stepped the bike as its front tyre was nearly upon him and used both his hands to give a mighty shove. The rider spun off his seat, across the road and hit the wall on the other side of the bridge. Adrian walked across to him as he started to rise, and swung his right fist to hit the other man on the throat. As Hendrick started to splutter, Adrian gave a swift kick to his knee, and smiled grimly as the resulting snapping sound denoted a broken leg.

Hendrick wretched before hoarsely trying to speak. “You shouldn’t ‘ave done that, sleazeball. Lucy belongs to Juke, so there’s no point in trying to defend her. You’ve managed to stop Matt and me, but one of the gang will get you. You’re a marked man now. You’d better say your prayers as you ‘aven’t got long to live.”

“I saw everything,” said Mr Welham, who had suddenly reappeared, and was restraining his dog which was growling at the injured figure. He tried to run you and Lucy over. I’ve already rung the police, and Looney and I will guard this thug until they arrive. I suggest you go and find Lucy. I’m not sure where she is.”

Adrian looked round. He remembered pushing her to try and get her out of harm’s way, but now there was no sign of her. He went over to the other side of the bridge and looked over the wall, and realised that she must have fallen over the side of the structure when he’d shoved her. She was lying on a bed of reeds in the river, the water flowing around her and gurgling as if it was angry at the obstruction to its progress. He ran to the path that led from the end of the bridge down to the brook, and when he reached her, he knelt to provide a secure base for his weight, leaned out and she grabbed his hand. He dragged her across the weeds and mud, and held her in his arms as she shook.

“I was terrified when I saw you lying there. Are you okay?”

“Yes, the foliage on the riverbank broke my fall. I’ll probably have a couple of bruises, but I should be fine.”

She was soaked, and dripped onto his trousers as they shared a long, lingering kiss. “I am very grateful for what you did. If Hendrick had hit me, I would probably have ended up in hospital with a very serious injury. But please could you do me a favour?”

“Anything,” he answered.

“If you’re going to protect me, please don’t try and give me swimming lessons at the same time. I can already swim.”

As he replied, Adrian’s face took on a mock sadness. “As you’re nagging me, I think you’re definitely going to be alright.”

“Of course I am, you idiot. I’m as tough as old boots. But I am very cold, so you’ll need to take me home and warm me up properly.”

Adrian rolled his eyes and laughed. “Okay, but you really do have a one-track mind.”

“You haven’t heard the best of it. I think I’ll be a bit too shaky to drive, so you’ll have to do it again.”

“I’ll give it a go,” he replied, “but you’ll need to keep your hands to yourself so that I can concentrate.”

“You really do have a bad memory. I’ve just told you I’m really cold, so I’ll need to snuggle up to you so that I don’t catch pneumonia. That means

that you won't have any hands free to fight me off as you'll have to manage the steering wheel as well as holding the string for my door. I think I'll take advantage of that."

He groaned. "That's going to be very distracting. I'll need to drive slowly to reduce the danger that we'll be in, but unfortunately that will also give you more time for your groping."

"Now you're getting the idea," smiled Lucy. "You really can be dim sometimes."

Chapter 6.

Adrian parked his vehicle very carefully in the multi-storey car park. It was one of those modern concrete constructions that have sprouted up and down the country in the decades following the war, and its three levels that were sited just behind the centre of the town were covered with graffiti. One set of words protested the alleged injustice that it claimed was being perpetrated by one of the participants of a distant war, with the caption next to it claiming the same was being committed by the opposition. A different display shouted the author's affections for a girl called 'Sarah', a separate one stating that 'Zac' was the love of the scribe's life. And the wall next to the exit exhibited a mural that was a blaze of reds, blacks and yellows and hinted at the superiority of the conurbation's soccer team. Another next to it promoted the alternate author's support for a neighbouring squad.

Adrian chose a slot at the far end of a row so that there was a reduced risk of the paint work getting scratched by a neighbouring machine. The cost of having even a small blemish to the bodywork repaired would be eye-watering, but then everything about his car was expensive. The plush leather seats that warmed up on a cold day. The smooth dash that looked like something out of a space craft. The engine's gentle purr that belied an extremely powerful motor under the sleek bonnet. The incredible gadgetry that gave an impression that it would be equally effective in a star ship as it wound its way through the solar system.

As they both climbed out of the low, sleek vehicle, they looked at each other and smiled. "Are you ready for a lot of noise?" she asked.

He nodded. "A good idea of yours to come here. I've never been to a farmer's market before."

His mind briefly flitted back to the moment when she had mentioned it. It was the third morning he'd woken up next to her, and the sun's rays were streaming through the thin curtains to illuminate the room. The wallpaper's multi-hued floral patterns seemed to come alive, the red poppies vying with the yellow daffodils and the blue cornflowers to overwhelm the onlooker's senses with nature's promise of a gloriously colourful world.

He remembered thinking yet again how Lucy's rough but tender care of him had done wonders to dispel the nightmare he had endured until she had swept him up and wrapped him in her cocoon. He had turned to look at her, eagerly absorbing the peace that her calm breathing exuded. She lived a tough life that was driven by the seasons, but he couldn't imagine anyone who was as happy with their routine. He felt envious.

Strange emotion, that. Envy. Why should he feel such a sentiment? He had achieved the professional status and success that he had sought for as long as he could remember. He had a very comfortable apartment in a lovely part of the city and more than enough money for his needs. Yet, these were mere material items on a planet that was dominated by the elements. Lucy worked within the tough constraints that the world inflicted on her, and gained a fulfilment.

Eventually she opened her eyes, and slowly became aware of his gaze. She smiled. “I hope you weren’t thinking of running out of here,” she said. “You’ve got to make some of that delicious coffee with your wonderful machine.” They both laughed, and after making love again, she mentioned the market, and that she wanted to look around the livestock on offer for her father.

Now, a couple of days later, and holding hands, they wandered out of the car park and into the tumult of noise. Lucy had mentioned that these events were held every week, and that farmers travelled from many miles around to attend. Adrian looked around the town’s square in which the numerous tents and other temporary constructions were hosting the animated discussions of the attendees. There was one road that meandered into and out of this confined district and he could see that during other parts of the week any vehicles that wished to navigate their way along its path would have their progress interrupted by a couple of pedestrian crossings. There were a number of buildings that lined the area, their height varying but it was clear that the constant façade of the shop fronts allowed the needs of the local inhabitants to be met. There was quite a range of establishments, thought Adrian, ranging from charities to those that stocked high-end articles like designer clothes or expensive watches.

He noticed that one of the numerous tents was dedicated to serving beer and other snacks, and seemingly provided a haven to those who wished to take a break from the maelstrom of activity. “Shall we go in there and see whether they serve coffee as good as mine?”

“No. Later. I want to see what’s going on in the main marquee,” and tugged at his hand in a manner that left him in no doubt of the consequences should he refuse.

On entering the large canvas covering, they were met with rows of temporary metal fencing, behind which various animals were chomping on hay, the satisfied look on their faces illustrating their ignorance of their potentially bleak future as the main dish on someone’s plate. Lucy headed for the animals and stood quietly at the railings, examining the beasts. “Father needs a bull. Or rather the consortium he’s part of needs one.”

“Consortium? What does it do?”

She looked at him and sighed. “You really don’t know much about farming, do you?”

“No, that’s why I’ve brought you along as a guide,” he replied.

Lucy laughed. “Okay, well, cows need the attention of a bull every year so that they produce the calves that we eventually sell to help make enough profit. But bulls are expensive so a number of farmers group together into a consortium to share the cost of buying and looking after one. The problem we have is that the previous animal had to be destroyed suddenly last month.”

“Oh, that must have been a difficult decision for its owners. What happened?” asked Adrian.

She briefly glanced at him again, then returned her gaze to the bovines. “Yes, it was. Some townies who were out for an afternoon’s walk at the weekend let their dogs off the lead, and their lovely pets terrorised the bull and it ran into a ditch and broke its leg. The vet advised that we had to put it down.”

“That’s terrible. Will you be able to get compensation from the dog’s owner?”

“No, dad saw the incident from an upstairs window of his house and ran out to confront the idiots, but they had disappeared by the time he got there. The consortium’s going to have to claim on its insurance, and of course it will mean that the premium will be even higher next year.” She sighed. “As if losing the bull wasn’t enough!”

“I have some savings. Maybe I could repay some of your kindness by contributing to the cost of a new animal.”

Lucy turned and wrapped herself around him in a huge hug, and then leant up so that her mouth was level with his ear. “Thank you. I think the consortium might take you up on that offer when I mention it to them, but I’ll give you a more special ‘thank you’ when we get back. I knew you’d be useful when I invited you to stay.”

Adrian laughed. “You’re such a tease.”

“Just you wait till we get home and you’ll find out if I’m only teasing.”

They went over to the circular space where the cattle were being sold off. It was surrounded by more railings, behind which many people were avidly watching the proceedings, and some were arguing with their immediate neighbours, their hands gesticulating wildly. Others stood

further back in a looser crowd, examining a list that Adrian thought was probably a catalogue of animals for sale.

At the side opposite to where Lucy had taken him the auctioneer stood on a raised dais, but despite straining to listen, Adrian couldn't understand what the gentleman was shouting. He was certainly speaking very fast. However, there was no doubt that a brisk trade was being undertaken by him and the numerous customers that surrounded him. Adrian watched as another beast was brought into the centre of the group, paraded around whilst various bids competed for the creature, the hammer went down and the process was repeated.

Lucy touched his arm to get his attention. "I haven't seen anything that will interest the consortium so far. Father and the others will be very disappointed. Thankfully the old bull managed to do his duty this year before we had to have him destroyed, and we've had a bumper crop of calves. But nobody will be happy till a replacement has been found. They don't want to start paying fees to hire an animal from elsewhere. Around here, that's very expensive."

They continued to watch the proceedings, but after a couple of hours the auctioneer announced that all of the lots had been sold, so they turned to leave.

"Come on," said Adrian. "There are some enticing smells coming from the food tent. I'm peckish."

They wandered passed the various stalls en route to the refreshment tent. He stopped to look at one which displayed little animals. The sign at the front proudly proclaimed them to be handmade out of crystal. He picked up a yellow figure of a chicken, the light tinge of colour and delicate striations denoting the bird's feathers. "This reminds me of when we first met," he said. "The first night in your cottage, you came into the lounge to share the fire after you'd fed them."

Lucy gently took the figurine from him, handed over the money to the stallholder and then turned, smiled and presented it to him. "Now you have a souvenir of our little trip out today."

As they walked away, he whispered, "you needn't have done that. You have done so much for me already."

"I wanted to. It's been lovely to have someone around the place. I've been quite lonely and depressed since Juke left. You've already thanked me a lot, although I don't think I've done much. But this is my way of showing you that I'm glad we met in the lane and that you agreed to stay. I think my heart would have burst if you hadn't."

As they shared another cuddle, Adrian ran his hands through her hair and absorbed himself in the lingering smell of the shampoo she'd used; the faint trace of her perfume; the scent of freshly washed clothes that she exuded. He couldn't believe he'd met such a complicated but delightful person so soon. He had thought that he would never recover from Jemima. And now, here he was in the arms of such a wonderful lady.

After they'd had a cup of coffee and some strawberry cake in the refreshment tent, they walked back to his car. As they entered the floor of the underground car park that his vehicle was on, he asked, "what do you want to do tonight? Do you want to go out for a meal somewhere?"

"What do you think I want to do, after you've just crushed me in that hug?" she answered. "We can have some food after you've done your duty, just like our bull used to do."

As Adrian laughed, a voice said, "hand over your money and no-one will get hurt. Carefully, now, or I might have to use this knife."

Adrian looked at the chap who had suddenly appeared from behind one of the concrete stanchions. He wore scruffy jeans and trainers, a base-ball cap and under his half blackened and filthy denim jacket there was a heavily creased t-shirt that displayed a slogan that boasted of a concert by a famous rock group that had been completed many years ago.

"Don't be silly," responded Adrian. "You're not going to try and use that puny little thing. And if you do, I'll break your legs. Now get lost."

"I'm serious," replied the mugger. "Hand over your money. You wouldn't want your girlfriend to get hurt, would you!"

As Adrian moved towards the criminal, his adversary slowly backed away. "Don't try anything, mister. This wouldn't be the first time I've used this."

"Yes, it would," answered Adrian. "You're pathetic". His arm swung round and hit the villain under the chin with his full strength. The chap fell backwards, hit his head on the wall behind and slumped to the ground in a coma. Adrian picked up the knife, examined it for a moment, tutted and broke it in half over his knee.

"That's dealt with him. I wonder what made him do that. He certainly wasn't very good at mugging people. It could almost have been his first time. Hopefully he's learned his lesson. Come on. Let's get home."

"I know him," she said. "He was in school with me, and he used to bully me. I think he was waiting for me, but didn't know you'd be with me. It's no secret that I come to the farmers' market every month, and this car park is the only place to leave a car. He's done this to me before. Last

time I had to give him my purse. Luckily, on that occasion I'd banked most of the money after I arrived in town, so he didn't get much."

Adrian could see that Lucy was shaking again and put his arm around her as they walked towards the car. When they were seated in the vehicle, Lucy said, "thank you for protecting me again, but I wish you'd stop doing it. I was terrified that you might get hurt."

"Yes, I'm sorry. I didn't think of that. But I doubt he'll bother you again."

"Maybe not, but don't you realise that you took a huge risk. Why did you do it?"

"I'm fed up of having no control over my life. I feel as if the world is pushing and shoving me in different directions, and I can't stop it. I thought I had a firm relationship with Jemima, but I found out by accident that she was making a fool of me by playing away. I couldn't find a way of escaping the grief that squashed me after she left, and existed in a twilight zone for months. And on top of everything, I've worked very hard for years, and although I've been paid well, my efforts have helped to make the partners of the firm very rich. I think that chap and his little knife was the last straw. He clearly didn't have any connection to Juke, and it gave me a chance to fight back against everything. This was a protest against the way my life has gone. But also, you've told me how much you've suffered from bullying and harassment from your time at school onwards. I really want a future with you, and want to protect that. This nutter could have ended my dream as it was only just getting going."

Lucy took his hand and kissed it. "I was very scared, and you were my knight in shining armour yet again. I think I'll need to make a special effort when we get home."

"Oh, not again," he said and they both laughed. The frenzied kiss that they shared said a great deal about the distressing situation they had just gone through, and the return journey to the cottage was shared in a tight clasp in which Adrian had to occasionally ask her to loosen her grip so that he could manipulate the gear stick. When they finally entered the front door, all thoughts of an evening meal were forgotten. The trail of clothes marked their passion as they went up the stairs to the bedroom where sleep alluded them for the rest of the night.

Chapter 7.

“This is where she lives,” said Lucy as she drove down the road. “I’ll park over there in front of her house, then you can let go of that string that’s holding the door. It’s probably just in time, from what I can see. Your knuckles have gone white with the effort.”

“You really do need to get another jeep,” he replied. “This is a positive death trap. I think I’ll buy you one before I leave to go back to work from that garage we passed in town.”

Lucy laughed. “There’s nothing wrong with my jeep that wouldn’t be helped by a little patience.”

“What about its struggles as we went up Senzar Hill? I thought you’d finally decided to ditch this chunk of scrap metal?”

“Well, I’ve changed my mind,” she replied. “I agree that it’s a little eccentric, but it’s got quite a bit of life left in it, so you won’t need to waste your money just yet.”

“When I’m not here to keep a watching eye over you, I’ll be worried that the next phone call I receive will be from the police to give me some tragic news. I think it might be best if you let me replace this jalopy for you.”

“Oh, well, let’s discuss it later,” she said. “Can you get the shopping out of the back?”

Adrian got out and retrieved the two shopping bags that bulged with a range of foodstuffs from the rear seat and stood on the tarmac whilst he awaited Lucy. She was placing the blocks of wood in front of the foremost wheels to ensure the vehicle didn’t roll away down the slight incline they’d stopped on. He smiled. She wouldn’t even admit that the brakes might need the attention of a mechanic, despite them being crucial to safety.

He stood for a moment, admiring the village street again. He realised that he was starting to become accustomed to the serenity it exuded. It seemed timeless. Most of the buildings were some hundreds of years old, and he could imagine them witnessing a busy thoroughfare consisting of horses pulling a wide variety of carts. Some wagons would have been filled with local produce that the drivers had grown themselves, and who were transporting their output to commercial clients. Others might have been making such deliveries to people’s homes as coal. There would probably have been loud noises being emitted by the tradesmen to announce their presence. And there might even have been a private carriage conveying its passengers from one eminent location to another.

He sighed as his mind returned to the present. This place was very different from the rural environment in which he'd grown up. The one in which he was now standing had many more inhabitants and must require a commensurate heightened number of merchant trades. He could make out a plumber's sign outside one house, another offering the skills of an electrician, and further on he could just make out a garage that seemed to provide the duel purposes of servicing vehicles and supplying fuel.

He turned his gaze to the cottage they'd come to visit. To reach it from the road, it was necessary to cross a little bridge of about two metres in length that comprised a couple of flagstones. This arched over what might normally have been regarded as a gutter, but here there was a stream flowing down it. One of the charms of an old street, he thought. He watched as the clear water gurgled as it romped over the loose stones that were at the bottom of the channel, as if the liquid was annoyed that anything should impede its progress.

Like many others in the conurbation, the house they were going to visit had obviously been constructed a long time ago, the age of the weather-worn fawn stone blocks giving the vista a great deal of appealing character. The roof tiles varied in size, and the ridge at the top undulated. The stream of grey smoke spilling out of the chimney surrounded the immediate vicinity with the aromatic scent of burning wood. Two white-framed windows sat symmetrically on either side of the wood-panelled main door, and the rose ladened metal arch which allowed access to the small front garden sprouted a prospect of yellow, white and red blooms.

They approached the house and Lucy knocked. Nothing. "Harriet's a dear, but she's a little deaf. I usually have to persist till she hears me." She knocked again, and this time they heard the faint stirrings of movement somewhere towards the rear of the dwelling, which gradually grew louder till the door opened.

Harriet uncomprehendingly stared at Lucy for a moment, then recognition seemed to slowly sweep over her. "Hello, dear," said Harriet. "Sorry I took so long to come through. I'm not as young as you are, I'm afraid. Come in."

Lucy and Adrian were led into a room at the front of the property, which clearly served as a lounge. There were two lusciously comfortable chairs positioned together at the side of a small settee, with a dark brown coffee table within easy reach. There were a couple of pictures on the walls which displayed rural scenes that would have been contemporary a couple of centuries ago, and there were frilly net curtains that covered the old windows and which added to the old-world ambiance. A large wooden sideboard stood against the wall furthest from the entrance of the chamber, which was covered with a number of old photos. Harriet

noticed Adrian staring at one that showed a young man in military uniform.

“That’s a lovely picture,” he said. “Is it your brother?”

Harriet was silent for a moment. “No, dear,” she replied quietly. “That’s my Harold. We were engaged but he was killed whilst he was on his national service during the Korean war. I was never interested in anyone else after that, even though I know he would have wanted me to be happy.”

“Harold’s family worked on our farm for three generations,” interjected Lucy. “Harriet did as well, until she retired ten years ago. Do you want to tell Adrian what your job was, Harriet?”

“Yes, dear. My Harold worked with the cows out in the fields as well as in the barn before he was sent off to the war. I was inside the house, cleaning and doing a bit of cooking. Happy years, they were.”

Lucy looked at Adrian and smiled. “Things were very different back then. The farm was a lot more profitable. And Harriet was a very good cook. We still reminisce about the Christmas lunches she prepared. She had an excellent reputation in the locality, and our neighbours were always trying to get invitations at the festive seasons to come over just to taste her meals. She was like one of the family, so when she retired we let her use one of the farm’s spare cottages. This one is in the village where she could get to the shops more easily, and was sitting empty, so we had it done up ready for her. I also visit regularly to bring round some meat and other things. To be honest, I enjoy coming here. We always have a nice time.”

Lucy turned to Harriet. “But today, I can’t stay long. Sorry. I’ve got some shopping to do and I’ve promised to show Adrian the village church.”

“Oh, that’s alright dear. I think he’ll like our church. It’s very old and has a lot of stories to tell. During the Civil War in the 1600s some of the roundheads stole all of the sacred vessels, burned the pews for firewood and stabled their horses there. It took a hundred years for the village to replace everything. We’ve never been a wealthy community.”

“I remember you telling me that when I was a little girl,” said Lucy.

“Yes, dear. That’s right. And then the Germans hit it with a bomb during the Second World War, in 1941. I was still quite young at the time. It was a lone plane that had become separated from the others, and had already dropped the rest of its load on London. It was on its way home with one bomb left, and I don’t think it wanted to try and land at its airfield in France with that underneath. So, they ditched it over enemy territory. I think they expected it to blow up on open fields, but instead it hit our

lovely church. It took twenty years to complete the repairs, although they've done it very nicely. You'd never guess which is the new part."

"I might take him across to the little museum first," said Lucy. "It's got some old farm implements which are interesting. A couple of them look like they could easily be used for torture. You know, used as a mantrap to snap closed on poachers' legs."

"Oh, yes dear. I remember them digging those out of the ground in the 1950s. Some of the boys used to take their girlfriends along to see them when they'd been moved indoors to one of the landowner's outlying barns just to prove they weren't frightened. I think the girls thought it was funny, so played along with it all. A couple of the youngsters tried to touch them to show off and had nasty accidents, so they decided to donate them to the museum."

Lucy rose from her chair and brushed her skirt down. "That's a nice dress, dear," said Harriet. "You look very pretty in it." She looked at Adrian. "Doesn't she look nice! You're a lucky young fellow. She hasn't really linked up with anyone since that dreadful chap left."

"Yes, my father never liked him either," said Lucy. "It seems that everyone else except me thought that."

"Yes, dear, that's perfectly natural. It's true. Love does blind people. He really was a rotter, though."

Harriet looked at the photo of her fiancée and sighed. "Mind you, you've had a lot of bad luck, haven't you, dear. All that bullying at school."

Lucy was quiet for a moment, obviously lost in thought. Then she replied, "I never could hide anything from you. The girls were as bad as the boys. I think the trouble started when I refused to go behind the sports block with Michael Revson just before Christmas in the third year in secondary school. He was the centre of the gang, and they all picked on me after that. A lot of the girls joined in just so they could be part of the group. Only Helen stuck by me, but she moved away four years ago with her work."

"I know. I used to see your dejected face when you came home from school every day and wished I could help you. I tried to get your parents to discuss it with the school, and they agreed but I think they were just too busy in running the farm, so forgot."

Lucy was motionless for a moment, obviously reliving those distant memories. "I wish I could have moved to a different school to escape those kids. But it was the only one around here, and there was no way for me to travel to another place. My parents couldn't spare the time to drive me, and there weren't any busses."

“I know, dear. But as you and I have discussed many times, it’s best to try and look forward, rather than back.”

“You’re right,” answered Lucy.

Well, dears, off you go and enjoy yourselves. I’ll see you next week Lucy.” She looked at Adrian. “You look like a fine chap. Make sure you look after my little girl.”

Lucy kissed Harriet on both cheeks, then led Adrian outside. After they’d closed the door, he said, “she’s lovely. I can see why you like coming to visit. You’ve mentioned the bullying to me before, but I didn’t realise you’d suffered quite so much. You don’t show any sign of it now. You seem so confident. Well, at least you did when you teased me so mercilessly in the lane.”

They walked through the little gate that led onto the road, hand-in-hand. “It’s not something I talk about, really,” said Lucy, “although I would have told you about it all eventually. I’m ashamed about it, and never know how people might react if I told them. And, well, I really didn’t want to scare you off.”

Adrian smiled and squeezed her hand. “No chance of that. I’ll have to return to my job quite soon, but I’d like it if we could continue to see each other. Maybe I could come down at weekends, if you don’t mind?”

“I’d really like that,” she replied.

They shared a hug, and then grasped each other’s hands as they crossed the road and walked towards the church. “I definitely have to show you inside here, now that you’ve heard those stories from Harriet,” said Lucy.

“I suppose I shall have to behave myself in there. That’s going to be really difficult.”

“Yes, you will have to control yourself,” she replied and smiled. “Don’t worry. I’m going to find it tough too.”

Chapter 8.

The first thing Adrian noticed on entering the church was a slight chill compared to the warm Spring temperature outside. Well, it's not surprising, he reflected. The thick stone walls would keep the interior cool, and the lack of money available to these institutions meant that it would be impossible to continually keep the heating system going.

The building wasn't very big, maybe about fifty feet in length, but the ceiling that soared above was magnificent. Thick wooden beams supported the roof, and had a number of Christian symbols hanging from them. The largest was the image of Jesus on the cross, the pained face clearly displaying the dreadful sacrifice he had endured for those he strongly professed to love.

The centre held the usual wooden pews, with the pulpit about three quarters of the way along, the outstretched wings of an elaborate timber eagle functioning as a lectern so that the bible used by the priest could be rested there. The altar at the far end consisted of a brass cross standing on a table that was covered by a white sheet. Presumably all of the religious artefacts that were used during such services as holy communion were stored somewhere else for safety.

The stained glass was truly magnificent. The details and colours were so vivid. As he and Lucy quietly started to wander along one side, Adrian could make out some of the various Christian scenes that were depicted on them. A remarkable one conveyed the Messiah's birth in a barn, surrounded by impressive looking spectators which he assumed to include the three Wise Men. The writing on another suggested that the visual image above it showed the baptism of St. John. As they moved further down the side aisle, a different one displayed thirteen people engaged in conversation as they shared what was obviously meant to be the 'Last Supper'.

At that moment a door next to the altar opened and a man with a dog collar emerged through it. He sauntered over to the duo. Adrian thought he looked exactly as he imagined someone of that calling would. He wore a black jacket and similarly coloured trousers and was middle aged with greying hair around his temples, the rest having a light brown tinge as it swept to one side in a parting. Yet, Adrian thought that it was the priest's grey eyes that were the most noticeable. They seemed to see right into his mind; as if they could read his soul.

"Hello, vicar," said Lucy. "Let me introduce Adrian to you. He keeps following me around, despite my attempts to shake him off. So, I've had to adopt him temporarily till I can persuade an animal rescue centre to take him in. Adrian, this is Reverend Pearce. He's been here so long that I think he's grown roots, and now even weedkiller can't remove him."

They all laughed. “You always had an, shall we say, individual sense of humour,” said the vicar. He looked at Adrian and smiled. “I’m guessing you’re her boyfriend? I was wondering how long it would take her to find a replacement for Juke.” He returned his gaze to Lucy. “I assume you haven’t seen him again since he left at such short notice?”

“No,” she replied. “But members of his gang have tried to prevent me having any more relationships. They say I still belong to Juke.”

“Yes. There have been a couple of young men who you’ve tried to have a relationship with, haven’t there? There was that chap down from Scotland, if I remember correctly. What was his name? Oh, yes. Calum. And then there was the tourist who was visiting all of the churches in the district so he could pursue his hobby for brass rubbings. I think he was called Mark, wasn’t he? And then Chris appeared from the town. He was a student working in a local bar to earn some extra money.”

“You’re right, answered Lucy. “None of them lasted more than a couple of dates. They weren’t able to stand up to the hassle from Juke’s gang. But Adrian seems to be doing well, so far. I’ve had a few threats from them, but Adrian has protected me magnificently. I’ve been gradually showing him the area. We’ve been up Senzar Hill as well as around the village a little. I’ve introduced him to Harriet and now it’s the church’s turn.”

“I’m glad you brought him in here. I am quite proud of it. Did you know it dates back to 1302? There was a local lord of the manor who led a very disreputable life. He gave the tenants on the farms he owned rather a bad time. And, of course, he delighted in indulging in his rights of ‘droit du seignor’. Many a bride had to succumb to him in bed on her wedding night. It seems that his conscience caught up with him on his death bed. Well, with the help of his religious confessor whispering in his ear about his looming eternal suffering in hell. As a result, he gave enough money to build this church in an attempt to save his soul. Whether it worked and he managed to pass through the pearly gates is anybody’s guess. I won’t know until I get to the hereafter. If he’s there too, then it worked.”

“I don’t like the idea of this droit du seignor,” said Lucy. “I wouldn’t like some hairy landlord dragging me off to his house for the night. Didn’t any of the bridegrooms complain?”

The vicar was quiet for a moment. “Hmmm. I’m not sure. I have been through the archives for this church because I am fascinated by it, but I haven’t come across anything like that in them. Mind you, if your lord of the manor had total control over the local community, including whether you kept your house and the means of putting food on the table, it might be a little difficult to complain. And, then of course, generally only the nobility and priests and monks could read and write, so I suppose it’s not surprising that there are no records to tell if they ever protested.”

“I’ve noticed some interesting plaques on the walls,” said Adrian. “I was particularly interested in this one about the district’s Pal’s Battalion in the First World War. What does that mean?”

“Yes,” said the rector demurely. “That was terrible. The generals thought that if a whole battalion of about eight hundred men were recruited from the same area, the fact that they’d all know each other would mean that they’d fight more readily and fiercely for their friends. Possibly it was a good idea, but the practical effect was devastating. That was an industrial war, using modern weapons. Machine guns mowed down swathes of enemy soldiers in a short space of time. Did you know that in the first hour of the battle of the Somme, which started on 1st July 1916, there were at least fifty thousand casualties. Our Pals Battalion which was formed from the local town and all of the villages around here was almost wiped out. They were sent to the front line as soon as they arrived in Flanders, and went into action straight away. Only fifty three were alive three weeks later. It meant that there were very few young men for the girls to marry, and the number of babies being born fell dramatically. So, the older men, who should have retired, had to keep working till they could hardly move just to ensure that there were enough labourers, such as to get the fields tilled. And, don’t forget, they didn’t have tractors back then. Everything was done by hand, such as cutting the corn at harvest time with scythes.”

The group was silent for a moment. “I guess it must have been like that during other colonial wars, where the soldiers just stood up to receive enemy fire,” said Adrian. “I can imagine battles like those in the Indian wars against the brave Sikhs in the 1840s must have been bad. I seem to remember from my History lessons at school there was one where General Gough ordered his troops to walk towards the enemy lines into a hail of cannon balls and grape. They weren’t even allowed to run in case they were out of breath when they reached the enemy.”

“Yes, sheer slaughter,” replied Reverend Pearce. “Actually, there’s another plaque over here that honours the soldiers that fought out there. It mentions two of the clashes, at Mudki and Ferozeshah.”

“Sorry to interrupt you both,” said Lucy, “but I think we’d better be going. It’s getting quite late, and I’ve got to feed some of the animals before we have dinner.”

The vicar looked at Adrian. “It’s been nice meeting you. I hope you enjoy the rest of your stay. I’m guessing you don’t live near here. When do you leave?”

“No, I live in a concrete jungle which some people politely call a city. I’ve only got a few days left, then I have to return to work.”

“What do you do for a living?” asked the rector.

“I’m an accountant, specialising in international tax, and I’m part of a large firm.”

“I’m sure it’s very interesting, but it’s not my cup of tea at all. I like to get around my parish and meet people instead of being stuck in an office.”

“Hmmm, I can see why you might say that,” answered Adrian, “but I’ve had quite a few adventures, especially when I’ve had to go overseas to visit clients.”

“I’d like to hear about some of those,” interrupted Lucy,” and I’m sure my father would too, but not now. We really do have to go.”

Adrian and Lucy walked through the porch and into the graveyard that surrounded the church. There were several rows of headstones marking the immortal homes of a number of local residents. Lucy grabbed his hand and pulled him over to a particular one. Adrian scanned the scene. There were some trees about ten feet high that intermittently marked the perimeter of the site, and a low, stone wall behind them. The rays of the dying sun were streaming through the leaves, and reflecting off water droplets that were held by the blades of the neatly cut grass. It really was a lovely place to spend eternity, he thought.

“This grave is for my grandparents,” she said. “Hetty and Samuel. They died when I was seven, but I have lovely memories of them. I went round to see them most days, and my gran always gave me a huge kiss on my cheek and a hug. Then she’d give me milk and a chocolate biscuit. I think she kept them specially for me. And my grandad slipped me a little bit of extra money every week. He said it was to top up my pocket money, but I had to spend it on sweets.”

“They sound marvellous.”

“Yes, they were. My family has been in the village over two hundred years. My ancestors’ graves are scattered all around here, although you can’t read some of the headstones now because they’ve been worn out by the weather.”

Adrian looked at Lucy wistfully. “I don’t know where my family were two hundred years ago. Maybe I’ll look into it some time. All I do know is that my parents moved to the village where I grew up because my mother needed the peace of a detached rural setting to recover from her illness, and they just stayed there afterwards.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. I hope it wasn’t too bad for her,” said Lucy.

“I’m not sure, exactly. It all happened before I was born. She was badly bullied at work by her boss, and, as they used to say in those days, she suffered a nervous breakdown.”

Lucy gave Adrian a hug and then grabbed his hand. “Come on. We’d better go. I’ll need time after I’ve done my chores to have a shower before I put you to work upstairs. We might be able to have something to eat after that.”

“It’s Little Lucy. Come and give us a kiss, Little Lucy,” said Michael Revson. He turned to look at the two other chaps behind him with a huge grin on his face, and they all laughed.

Adrian looked up to see a group of three men standing in the graveyard, about four metres away. They all wore similar clothes, consisting of scruffy light blue denim jackets, darker navy jeans and black boots, and also had long, greasy hair and looked like they hadn’t shaved for several days. He smiled to himself. It must be the uniform of their gang, he thought.

“Why don’t you leave me alone. You’ve not changed,” answered Lucy.

“Oh, so you’ve remembered me, and how you used to fancy me at school.”

“I’ve never fancied you. Actually, Helen and I used to laugh at you, and your stupid hair. That style went out twenty years before. You looked stupid then, and you still look stupid. Go away.”

“You do seem to have forgotten that you belong to Juke, though. He’s a member of our gang, and we look after our own. One for all, and all for one, eh lads?” Revson glanced at his friends, and they all nodded and laughed.

He returned his gaze to Lucy. “If I were you, I’d tell your boyfriend here to get lost for his own good. Juke will eat him alive, after we’ve finished with him, that is. And then there’s a little matter of our other mates who he’s been fighting with.”

Adrian stepped forward swiftly, taking Revson by surprise. The thug doubled over, finding it hard to breathe after Adrian’s fist hit him in the solar plexus, and the shocked look on his face remained with him as he collapsed onto the ground after he received another vicious upper-cut to his chin. He got up, and Adrian’s clenched knuckles slammed into the side of his head, sending Revson stumbling backwards until he tripped over the side of a grave, letting out a loud groan as he fell and banged his head on the headstone immediately behind him, which rendered him unconscious.

Adrian looked directly at the other two. “I’m happy to extend the same treatment to you, if you’d like. Or you can get lost. The choice is yours.” The two men slowly backed away, turned and ran into the street.

Adrian turned round, to find that Lucy was in tears. He wrapped his arms around her, and she buried her head into his shoulder. As her body shook with violent sobs, she whispered, “thank you. I’m not sure what I’m going to do without you when you go back to your job. No-one’s ever stuck up for me like you’ve been doing, and I’ve been scared to come into the village on my own since Juke went.”

“I’m sure we can find a way to continue together,” said Adrian quietly. “And, anyway, I’ve still got a few days of my holiday left.”

“I know,” she replied between sobs, “but I’m dreading it when you go.”

“Why don’t we go over to that coffee shop over there again and spoil ourselves with the largest piece of cake they serve?”

“I pulled you out of your tears when you were in the lane, and now you’re doing the same for me. Yes, let’s go, but on condition that I choose.”

“That’s my girl. Back to your normal bossy self.”

They both laughed as they firmly grasped each other’s hands and trotted off towards the establishment that they hoped would delight their taste buds.

Chapter 9.

Adrian looked up from the desk which was situated in a room in the downstairs area in Lucy's father's house, and which faced the window. It was clear that it had been used as the farm office for quite a considerable period, the wooden filing cabinets having multiple piles of paper on top of them. Above that, there were three levels of shelves that held even more records, some in lever-arched folders, others lying in what appeared to be random heaps. The front of the second desk abutted the one he was using, but as it was vacant there was no block to the outside view, which showed the carefully manicured garden.

There were high hedges that lined the perimeter, and which gently moved with the soft eddies of breeze that floated around the grounds. The large lawn and its curved edges snaked away into the distance where a couple of white framed greenhouses stood sentinel as if trying to encourage their immediate environments into similarly upright behaviour. The well-trimmed grass was edged with flowerbeds that were crammed with low level bushes and a mixture of other plants that were apparently intent on competing with each other to attract the attention of the various insects that were working the area.

He thought back to the day following their first trip to the Post Office and the local village. He had risen with Lucy at her normal early hour, and they had shared a short breakfast together. Up till that point he had made the coffee with the old machine he had brought with him, but every morning after that he had used the one that Lucy had bought him as a present from the wonderful little tea shop that served the delicious cakes. He frowned. That was after the first encounter with the thugs that were Juke's friends.

A smile returned to his face as he remembered the even more lavish compliments Lucy had paid him from the following morning onwards. She had lingered longer than the times before she had made the purchase, her eyes closed as she seemed to briefly float off onto an astral plane where the world's worries temporarily disappeared. When she'd finished, all she said as she got up from the table was, "you really do make wonderful coffee," before exiting to start her duties.

He had then wandered over to the main farmhouse where Lucy's father resided. He pondered how the gentleman had lived there on his own since his wife had died a few years ago, and smiled as he thought about the couple and the deeply loving relationship they had obviously enjoyed. That was clearly attested to by the numerous photos he had observed on his last visit, showing them arm in arm in various locations around the farm, as well as in distant holiday venues. One was evidently taken at the top of a mountain, the rugged foreground of loose rocks and larger boulders contrasting with the panoramic views to their rear, where bright

sunshine highlighted the vast tracts of countryside that stretched away into the distant horizon. There were even a couple of birds soaring casually on the wind as if they were taking a break from their normal life and death struggles with nature to practice their technique.

The day after they had met, he and Lucy had gone for an evening walk on a path through the nearby woodlands. The temperature had been warm and they had wandered slowly through the glades in which the fading sunlight shone in bright beams, intent on providing the maximum illumination on the world before it rested for a few hours. There were a few squawks and chirps from those birds that were still hungry, but otherwise there was a settled calm over the scene.

He had described how his parents still lived a similar life to that which they had always pursued, albeit they were both retired now. They resided in his childhood house, and despite his mother's delicate health, they engaged with their friends in the same clubs and societies. And, of course, they still had the same sturdy Scandinavian car that he had always known; a solid and loving family environment in which to grow up. The only difference was that they now took more holidays in increasingly exotic locations.

He remembered the sympathy he felt as Lucy then related more detail about her contrasting homelife. She didn't have any siblings either. However, the difference was that her mum and dad had incessantly needed to work on the farm, the chores partly dependent on the needs of the animals and also of the seasonal requirements of the land they nurtured in an attempt to eke a living out of it.

When Lucy was eighteen, her mother had gone out in the jeep they owned at the time to buy some special feed for a particular calf that was ailing, and was rounding a tight bend when her vehicle was hit by an oncoming machine that was on the wrong side of the road. The fact that the other driver was drunk and was charged by the police and jailed for a lengthy period didn't help. It couldn't bring Lucy's mother back, and her father had permanently withdrawn into himself. Lucy had related how this made it especially difficult for her as she was unable to alleviate her own grief through sharing a joint sorrow.

Now, as Adrian mindlessly watched a cat preening itself on the lawn, he considered the farm's accounts that he was reviewing, and the financial position they displayed. As the business had been making a loss since Lucy's mother had died, it was clear that her father had neglected to keep on top of these important registers. Adrian had already found that quite a lot of expenses hadn't been recorded, and income had been banked but not written up. Nothing had been filed with the Tax Authorities, meaning that Lucy's father had paid the estimates produced by this government department rather than using accurate calculations to remit lower figures. From what he could now see, having spent a great

deal of time updating all of the ledgers, this meant that a significantly larger amount of tax had been paid than was actually due. Additionally, there were various other factors such as allowances for offsetting machine purchases against income that hadn't been claimed, exacerbating the issue.

He pondered the situation. Of course, it was fully understandable why things had been allowed to get out of hand. Lucy's father had previously shared the decisions and labour required to run the farm with his wife, and although following the accident he had taken on additional help at specific times of the year, it still left him with a great deal more to do on his own. Adrian knew there was nothing he could do to alleviate the physical strain in managing the operations of the enterprise, but at least he could straighten matters with the Fiscal Officials.

He turned to Shaun's laptop that he was using, and pulled up the relevant website pages and started to complete the details required for retrieving the overpaid tax. The digital form was lengthy but the effort would be worth it as there was a substantial amount due as a refund. This would considerably ease the immediate financial pressures on the farm. The next task was to institute a new filing system that would make it easier for Lucy's father to keep on top of his finances in future.

Adrian looked out of the window again. It was getting dark but he didn't notice. He reflected on how Lucy had pulled him out of the stupor he had fallen into by the force of her personality. He had never thought he would recover from the split with Jemima. He had believed that her betrayal had gone to the core of his being, and that the hurt would be a permanent and destructive feature in his future. Yet, here he was. Cheerfully engaging in a new daily routine. He revelled in the nascent feeling of having a positive focus for his life after the dull ache and bleak emotional horizon he had previously envisaged.

Then he started to ponder the protective feelings he was having for Lucy. There was no doubt that she deserved the sympathy he felt for her. He smiled. Well, that and an overwhelming sense of love. He'd never thought he'd have those kinds of emotions in him again after the disastrous end to his previous relationship, yet now he was keen to shield her from any threats that might shatter her happiness. Mind you, it was clear that her inner strength had enabled her to navigate her way through life so far, despite the brooding menace projected by Juke's gang.

He frowned for a moment. There were only three days left of his leave from his employer and he didn't want to go back. He was sure that Lucy would be happy for him to remain with her, sharing the cottage. He had never had to undergo physical toil to earn his living, but he now looked forward to learning the different skills that would enable him to contribute more actively around the farm.

And, of course, the best part was that he felt that a future existed that he wanted to grasp and shake with both hands so that he could extract as much joy out of it as possible. He'd never be able to experience such an exuberant existence if he returned to the offices where he had spent so many hours pandering to the needs of wealthy clients. Perhaps it was time for him to make the seismic shift away from the city and join Lucy permanently in this rural environment.

Well, he didn't have to make an immediate decision on that. He could discuss things with Lucy over the next couple of days, and if she agreed with him, the matter could be raised with her father. There would certainly be a lot to do if he was going to rearrange his life, and obviously he wouldn't just be able to leave the accounting firm where he worked. There was a little matter of the notice period he needed to give under his contract of employment. He smiled again. These were mere details that were immaterial when compared to the bright horizon he now contemplated.

He looked at the laptop and saw that the page of the government website now clearly showed that he had successfully entered all of the data for the required forms. A message said that the information he had submitted would be processed, and that a letter would be issued to provide notification of the result of their deliberations. Despite the impression given that there was uncertainty as to the outcome, he reflected, there was no doubt that Shaun would receive a substantial refund of the inflated taxes he had previously paid.

He turned the machine off, closed its lid and stared out at the garden again. Lucy had mentioned that Shaun had invited the couple over for a cup of tea when he had finished his work on the accounts. The gloom of twilight intertwined with the lengthening shadows produced by the various shrubs, resulting in an effect that seemed almost magical. The minute haze that rested over the grass moved with the slight breeze, as if a cauldron was being stirred by nature's bountiful hand. He sighed. It was such a delightful place, especially when compared to the concrete that dominated the urban area where his flat was.

He looked at his watch. The others would already be in the kitchen, waiting for him to join them. They would have put the kettle on again, and hopefully some of the cake that Lucy had made three days ago would already be sliced and resting on a plate in an attempt to entice everyone to gorge themselves. It really was delicious, he mused. She had worked all afternoon, chopping, mixing and cooking the ingredients, and smoothing the icing over the top. Another of her hidden talents.

He rose from the desk, and as he left the room, he briefly glanced back at the scene he was vacating. It still amazed him how such little effort from him could potentially transform someone else's life. The huge tax reimbursement that Shaun would receive would alleviate his cash flow

problems for a lengthy period, and for a few days' work in his employer's office, he could save the firm's clients millions of pounds.

He closed the door and wandered towards the kitchen that held the lady that he hoped would form the centrepiece of his future, and her father. He suddenly felt his mind and body become lighter, as if he was floating through the corridor that joined the study to his destination, disconnected from the physical aspects of the walls, floor and ceiling. Maybe he had found the peace he sought, in which he could forget the devastation that might have permanently engulfed him resulting from Jemima's infidelity. The time ahead might be full of challenges and hard toil, but he knew that with Lucy and Shaun to share it with, happiness beckoned. Once Lucy had absorbed him into her life after their meeting in the lane, there seemed that there was an inevitability to the outcome. He smiled yet again. Maybe the kind of vision he was having was what paradise was meant to look like.

Chapter 10.

“Wow, that really is an enormous amount of tax that you’ve reclaimed for me,” said Shaun. “I am most grateful to you. After my wife died, I just did the minimum paperwork necessary, and have been doing that ever since. I had no idea that things had got so far out of kilter.”

Adrian nodded. “I know. It’s easy to do. I’ve seen that happen to a lot of my clients at work. They neglect things, and only seek help when matters have become dire. We usually have to spend a great deal of time undoing their mess before we can get everything working correctly for them. Sometimes we have to call in lawyers too, and I’ve even had to make trips abroad to discuss matters with the officials in the foreign jurisdictions where they’ve become tax resident. The professional fees can be horrendous.”

“I can imagine,” replied Shaun. “That sounds very fascinating. You must have had some interesting adventures when you had to go overseas.”

Adrian sat silently for a moment, his mind roving over those times. “Yes, they were very hard work, and often the weather was quite extreme, like the very hot and humid temperatures that the Caribbean islands get. It does make it much more difficult to achieve things over there. But there were a couple of occasions that were particular fun.”

“Well, don’t keep us waiting,” prompted Lucy, and gave him a gentle kick to his shins under the table as encouragement. “Come on, spill the beans.”

Adrian laughed. “Okay, well, I remember one trip to an island in the Caribbean that I don’t think I’ll ever forget.”

Lucy gave him another gentle kick to his shin. “You’re doing this deliberately to wind us up. Don’t stop there. Get on with it.”

“The one that comes immediately to mind was to a well-known island holiday destination over there, mostly used by Americans for their vacations. The flight over was about nine hours, and went okay. I was standing outside the airport when this chap came up to me. He was wearing a staff identification badge and announced himself as representing the time-share company that I had contacted. Obviously, he frequently met potential customers at the airport, and his explanation confirmed that. As you can imagine, I was initially a bit confused. He’d clearly mistaken me for someone else, but I decided to play along. Anyway, he picked up my suitcase, took it over to a car that was parked nearby and placed it in the back seat.”

“Stop messing about,” said Lucy. “What happened next?”

“I got into the vehicle and off we went. I must say that as we drove along, he gave me a bit of a guided tour. Well, clearly, he thought that if he could raise my interest in the island then it might help his firm to sell one of their units to me. He described how the British and French had fought over the area two hundred years ago and that the British had won. Then he told me about a nature reserve that had many beautiful plants and where the bark of some of the trees is used as an aphrodisiac, and that that sanctuary had been preserved by the government many years ago. That wasn’t what I had read when I was doing my preparation for my trip. I’d discovered that they were in the process of selling all of that land to developers to build more holiday accommodation. The article I’d encountered speculated that several officials in the administration had taken hefty bribes.”

“That’s shocking”, interjected Shaun. “I hope we never get that kind of desecration to the beautiful countryside around here.”

“I agree,” replied Adrian. “But I think corruption over in that particular island is quite common,” he said. “Anyhow, this chap waffled on for the whole of the half hour journey. To be honest, it got quite boring, hearing about how amazing everything was. My research had previously indicated that the health services were on their knees, the education system only worked part-time and the roads, electricity, water and other infrastructure were in a dire state. Eventually we entered the outskirts of the Capital of the island. At first, it seemed like a shanty town, with rows of small shacks constructed out of corrugated iron sheets, and discarded packing material, but as we went nearer to the centre, the buildings became more solid and grand, and many displayed architectural features emanating from the colonial period. The driver was going to take me through this area, to the other side of the town where his resort was, but in doing so he had to pass my hotel. I asked if he could briefly stop at the front entrance as I needed the gents. He wasn’t happy, but did as I asked. I got out, and as I was retrieving my case from the rear seat I politely thanked him for all of the information he had given me about the island, as well as for the free lift. It had saved me a lot of time in not having to wait about for a taxi. You can imagine how furious he was. He started shouting things at me, but that was drowned out when I slammed the car door.”

Shaun and Lucy burst into peals of laughter. “That took some nerve,” said Shaun. “I’d never have been able to do it.”

“The fun didn’t stop there,” continued Adrian. “When I got to my room after checking in, I found that the bed was infested with bugs and there was a dead rodent in the bath.”

“What did you do?” asked Lucy.

“I went back down to the front desk to complain, and they had the cheek to say that they were full. That was the only room available. I called for the manager, but he backed up the receptionist. Well, that was until I slipped them both a little money, which you can imagine quickly disappeared into their pockets. They then gave me the bridal suite and said that it had been booked for a couple who were flying in the next day to get married on the beach and were expecting to use it for the rest of their two-week post-nuptial trip. They would now be offered a lower standard of room.”

“We’ve not been abroad very much,” replied Shaun. “The work on the farm doesn’t really allow that. But we’ve never encountered anything that bad.”

Adrian nodded his head. “Actually, after that little issue was resolved, the hotel turned out to be really nice, but the area around it seemed to be rough. I was on my way to meet my client the next morning when some young chap tried to stop me. He was brandishing a large knife and demanded that I hand him my wallet. I thought he looked a little nervous, so, just like I did when Lucy and I went to the farmer’s market, I took a gamble. I told him to get lost, stepped forward and smacked him on the nose. Of course, a lot of blood appeared and he howled a great deal. But it seems that because I’d stood up to him, he decided I deserved respect. You’re not going to believe this, but he followed me around for the rest of my three-day trip, saying that he would act as my bodyguard. He also took me home to meet his family and I enjoyed a particularly fine meal that his wife cooked for me on the second night. In the end, I gave him a tip which was probably far more than he’d earned in a long time from his normal line of business of mugging strangers. I’ve still got his details somewhere in case I go back. He promised to look after me again if I ever do.”

“So that’s where you got into the habit of hitting people,” replied Lucy. “Mind you, I’m not complaining.”

“No, indeed,” interjected Shaun. “Lucy has told me about that. On top of sorting out my accounts, you’ve been protecting my daughter. That’s another debt I owe you.”

“There’s no debt between friends,” answered Adrian. “And it was a natural thing to do, given that I’ve fallen in love with her. I hope you don’t mind, but I’d like to quit my job in the city and move in with Lucy down here.”

Lucy eventually grabbed Adrian’s hand across the table, before she broke the stunned silence that followed. “Oh, you idiot. I know we’ve discussed our feelings for each other, but you could have mentioned that to me before telling dad.”

Adrian smiled. “I guess I’m quite old fashioned. I was going to ask you first, but in the end I wanted to make sure that Shaun wouldn’t mind before we talked it over. But now that it’s in the open, how do you feel about it?”

A tear started to roll down her cheek. “Yes,” she replied. “I can’t think of anything that I’d like more.” She went silent for a moment as her emotion was obviously overcoming her. “Dad and I have been on our own since mum died, and we’ve purely focused on running the farm. It might be a bit strange at first as we’ve got used to relying on each other. Now there will be three of us. But it will be wonderful. And, in case you hadn’t already realised, I love you too.”

“And as for me, in answer to your question,” interrupted Shaun, “of course I don’t mind. You’d be very welcome. I’ve seen how you make Lucy happy, and an extra pair of hands around the farm would certainly be very useful.”

“Have you got any other tales you can tell us while I pull myself together,” said Lucy wiping her face with a handkerchief. “

Adrian smiled. “Yes, there is another one. I had to go over to a country in the far east to review an important client’s tax affairs as the local government had made some important changes to their fiscal legislation. He really was enormously rich and had no problem affording my fees and travel expenses. He was single at the time, but was about to get married to a lady who was a local journalist. The flight over was fine, as was the hotel. Well, my client owned it, so I didn’t expect any problems on this occasion. I was due to meet him the following morning in his office, which was about a two-minute walk away.”

“That all sounds okay, so far,” said Lucy.

“Yes, I agree. I turned up at his office about five minutes early, and announced myself to his secretary. She looked a little embarrassed when she asked me to take a seat till her boss was free. She waived a hand to a queue of three ladies that were lined up outside what she indicated was the room of the chap I had come to see.”

“Three ladies? That’s a little strange. You’d have thought he’d have organised his diary better than that if he expected you,” said Shaun.

“I know,” answered Adrian. “The secretary whispered that it was “that time of the week and her boss couldn’t be disturbed until he’d finished with all of them. I mean,” she said, “he had to pay them by the minute and they were very expensive.” So, I had to hang around for about half an hour until the last female appeared through the door, pulling her dress down as she crossed to the lift. It was a very nice waiting room, by the way, and the secretary did serve me with some nice coffee.”

Lucy burst out laughing. “I don’t believe you. Are you teasing me?”

“No, I’m afraid I’m not. Who says being an accountant is boring!” he replied.

“I don’t think I can bear any more of your stories, whether they’re true or not,” she said. “I’ve still got some chores to do before we have dinner. Why don’t we eat together in here tonight?”

“That’s a good idea,” said Shaun. “I’ve got some things that I need to finish too, but I’ve got a particularly nice bottle of wine we can have to welcome Adrian to the family.”

“In that case,” interjected Adrian, “I’ll do the cooking while you two are finishing up outside.”

Lucy gave Adrian a hug and they exchanged a quick kiss.

“Welcome to the family,” said Shaun.

Chapter 11.

Adrian decided to take a break from the work he was doing. Lucy's father was using the machinery somewhere else on the farm. It would normally have been applied to transferring straw from the huge pile in the barn onto the nearby trailer, so Adrian had volunteered to perform this task manually instead. The trouble was that it involved a pitch fork to spear the yellow stuff and move it over to the cart, and Adrian wasn't used to this kind of physical effort. He smiled. Well, he had spent his working life in an office, after all, and the heaviest implement he'd had to wield there was a pen.

He stood back, straightened himself, stretched and looked around the interior of the barn. It was constructed with wooden planks, with gaps every so often that allowed air to enter in order to provide the ventilation that prevented the dried grass from rotting. Most of the hay was bundled into bales, the piles rising upwards for about twenty feet, leaving a small gap below the roof. Sometime recently three or four of these had been untied and it was this loose material he was busy moving.

He'd only been 'at it', as Lucy called it, for about half an hour but he was already quite stiff. Actually, when he thought about it, it was surprising that he had managed to keep going for even that short period. He regarded himself as normally being very fit, and although he had quit his boxing activities on leaving university, he had worked out regularly in the local gym since commencing at the accounting firm. Maybe it really was true that the labour he was currently undertaking involved using muscles that weren't applied at the local sports facility.

As he wiped his forehead with his sleeve to stop the beads of sweat from running into his eyes, he thought about the morning. As usual, he had made the coffee for breakfast whilst Lucy toasted the bread and peeled the fruit that she insisted they eat. He could hear the words she said firmly every day; "look after your body and it'll look after you." His exertions in the gym proved that he agreed with that sentiment, but it was going to take more than a banana and some berries to stop the pain from his endeavours in this outbuilding.

After they had devoured everything else, Lucy paused whilst she savoured the coffee, then leaned over and kissed him. "What was that for?" he asked.

"Oh, just for being you. Oh, and for making such delicious coffee. Oh, and for offering to help out on the farm today. Well, you did say that you were happy to help, didn't you!"

Adrian had laughed. "Maybe I should volunteer for more things around here, if it earns me such lovely treatment."

“Oh, the kiss was purely because I just wanted to. Nothing else. But I know my father really does appreciate your help,” and with that she explained about the chore that needed to be done manually whilst Shaun was using the machinery. She continued, “one of the neighbours has asked for some of our surplus hay for their son’s pony as they’ve run out, and dad will be too busy to get it ready for them. That’s where you come in. I can’t help you. As it’s good weather, I’m going to be out with the tractor.”

“How old’s the lad?”

“He’s seven, and he loves his pony. His parents have trouble getting him in for dinner in the evening. He’s always fussing around the animal. It must be the best groomed creature in the district. Actually, they’ve got quite a lot of spare space in their barns, so they were thinking of opening a riding school.”

“That’s a good idea,” replied Adrian.

“Yes, farmers have to undertake lots of different activities to make ends meet. As you can see, we keep animals as well as grow crops. Our other neighbours run a bed and breakfast business as well. They used to have cottages that they let during holiday seasons to townies, but the recent tax changes have made that unprofitable.”

As she rose from the table she gave him another kiss. “I’d better go. You’ve had enough attention for the moment. If I’m not careful, you might get big headed.”

“What, at having a beautiful female kissing me all the time! No, I don’t think that’s likely,” and they both laughed as they left the room to start their tasks.

And now, here he was. Happily breaking his back for the woman he knew he had fallen deeply in love with. Maybe if he carried on working for the accounting firm for a little longer, they could save up a bit of money to pay for the wedding they had discussed. Neither of them wanted a lavish affair, but there was no doubt that they desired an elaborate honeymoon. Something far away on a tropical beach with good food and bars nearby.

The noise interrupted his thoughts. A vehicle had pulled into the farmyard and someone had slammed the door as they climbed out. That much was clear. Who could that be? As far as he knew, no-one was expected. Lucy’s father wanted a new piece of machinery to help in the dairy where the cows were milked twice a day, but the sales rep wasn’t due until tomorrow.

Then the shouting started. It was muffled, but it definitely involved a male voice. However, when he heard the scream, he dropped the pitch fork and swiftly exited the barn. That was clearly Lucy. He briefly paused before running towards the nearest field where he was certain that the shouting and screeching came from.

As he approached, he saw a man standing still, staring at something on the ground. The chap was quite young, perhaps in his thirties, with long black hair and wore a denim jacket and blue jeans. A knife that was covered in a red substance lay near to where he stood, and his black boots were also smeared. Yet, it was his hands that drew Adrian's stare. They were covered in what he could see was obviously blood, the substance rapidly dripping off them, leaving a pool near his feet. The hushed silence in contrast to the previous howls of fear was almost the worst part.

As he neared, Adrian saw Lucy lying still, her eyes closed. As he approached the other man backed away further. Adrian could smell the odour of some kind of illicit substance, and guessed that the visitor was high. Then he heard the stranger muttering. "She belongs to me. She shouldn't have gone with you. She's got what she deserves."

Adrian's hand swerved round to take the stranger on the nose. Blood poured down his chin and he stumbled backwards. Adrian then hit the stranger in the chest, this time the blow being so hard that a cracking sound was heard as ribs shattered under the ferocious attack, and he fell to the ground, writhing in agony.

Adrian took no notice of the pain in his knuckles as he crouched next to Lucy, ignoring the blood that flowed freely. They grasped each other's hands as she winced in pain. "Sorry, my darling," she stuttered slowly. "Juke has stabbed me. I don't think I'm going to make it."

"Of course you are. You have to. We are going to spend the rest of our lives together. Remember?"

Lucy clenched her teeth. "I know," she whispered slowly. "It's what I want more than anything. I fell in love with you the moment I saw you in the lane. You have looked after me so much."

"And I want to continue doing that. I can't wait to leave my job and come and live with you here."

"That would be wonderful. Look after dad for me. He'll be on his own now," she said, and Adrian whimpered as her head fell loosely and her hand went limp in his.

At that moment, Shaun arrived. Adrian watched as the older man climbed down from the tractor he had been driving, hurry over and hunker down

on Lucy's other side. He shared a glance with Adrian, and as the tears streamed down his face, he took hold of her wrist, then gently shook his head. "I can't feel a pulse. I'll call an ambulance," and jerking his head in Juke's direction, he said, "then I'll phone the police so that they can take care of this scum. He's going to wish he hadn't returned to the area."

Adrian looked down at Lucy again. The end of all his hopes. He hadn't been sure how he would survive after Jemima left him, but Lucy had put her emotional as well as physical arm around him, and dragged him out of his slough of despondency, and into the sunlight. In return, he thought he had ended the plague of bullying and harassment that his beloved girl had endured all of her existence, but her ex-boyfriend had terminated that dream. That miserable wretch that was lying in a heap nearby. Adrian stood up and walked over to the creature, and drew his leg back so that he could kick the life out of him. But just as he was about to let fly, he paused. No, that wouldn't achieve anything. It would be better to let the police deal with him.

He turned round and moved towards Shaun. Adrian reached down to lay a comforting hand on the older chap's shoulder, but as he touched him, he winced as the agony ran up his arm.

"You must have broken something when you hit Juke," said Shaun. "I'm going to follow the ambulance in my car. You clearly can't drive, so you'd better come with me so you can have them look at your hand.

Adrian shook his head. In addition to the pain, he suddenly felt very, very tired, and that the world was closing in. He dreaded the depression that he knew would hit him. It had been bad enough after Jemima left, but this was going to be much, much worse, and he had no idea how he would cope. If, indeed, that were possible at all. His last thought before he passed out from the pain was, 'I wonder if my employer will give me more time off work now.'

Chapter 12.

Adrian sat in a cubicle in the A&E department. He had come round in the front passenger seat of Shaun's car as they followed the blue light as it led the way through the traffic. "Welcome back to the land of the living. Just in time, as we're nearly there."

"How did I get into the car?" asked Adrian. "I would have thought I was too heavy for you to deal with on your own."

"The paramedics helped me after they'd put Lucy in the back of the ambulance. They said they couldn't find a pulse either, but wouldn't cover her face with the sheet. I think they could see how bad I was and didn't want to upset me anymore. They told me the ward where Lucy would be taken, although I have no idea what they do there. Once I've dropped you at the front door, I'll park the car and then go and find out where it is. Hopefully they've got a waiting area, as I'm not leaving until I know what's happening."

"Shaun, I'm really sorry about this," whispered Adrian. "I tried my best to protect her, but I didn't imagine Juke would come to the farm."

"I know, son. You couldn't have done more. I won't ever forget that, and will always be grateful to you. Ah, we're there. Give me a ring in a couple of days and hopefully I'll be able to give you an update."

Now, as he sat in the cubicle, he reflected on the events that had swiftly occurred since he had walked into A&E. He had almost immediately nearly fainted again from the pain in his fist, and only vaguely noticed that a nurse had rushed up to him and led him to this little cubby hole. She had promptly administered some pain killers and disappeared after promising to be back shortly. That was two hours ago.

The medication seemed to be having some temporary effect on the pain in his hand as his suffering had lessened for the moment. He surveyed his surroundings. Actually, he thought, there wasn't much to see. The building was fairly modern; he guessed that it might have been constructed in the last thirty years. There were low ceilings as you might expect in such a relatively recently erected property, and the walls were all white, with a continuous plastic strip at a height which he estimated to be about waist level and which he assumed was to protect the structure against the knocks and bangs of the various trolleys that the porters pushed through the area.

More immediately, there was a temporary screen made of plastic which separated his tiny space from the neighbouring one. Well, that was an overstatement, he thought. It gave a vague nod to privacy in that it prevented anyone watching what the occupants next door were doing,

but everything else was audible. He sighed. Even the low groaning he initially gave off due to the agony he was enduring when he arrived would easily be heard.

He was seated on a plastic chair, and there was a bed next to him, the wheels at the base of its legs making it fully portable. Handy if he fainted again, and needed to be moved somewhere else, he reflected. There was also a little cupboard on which the nurse had quickly put a plastic container full of water and a similarly constructed tumbler. Not that he would be able to do much, given his damaged hand, he mused.

“Ah, there you are.” Adrian was brought back from his reverie by the sound of the nurse’s voice. He hadn’t previously noticed that she wasn’t wearing any makeup, and yet had a strong beauty. Strange that he should notice that, he reflected. Maybe it was because it was a similarity that this young lady shared with Lucy. He briefly closed his eyes, trying to hold back the tears that were prompted by the images that tried to force their way into his mind.

The female in front of him now was about medium height and had a slim figure, probably kept like that because of all the exercise she must get walking about the lengthy corridors in the institution, he guessed. Her ginger hair was tucked underneath a white bonnet, and her blue eyes seemed to have a kindliness about them that portrayed a natural empathy with the suffering of others.

Suddenly his head started to spin, and he felt like he was beginning to hallucinate. The nurse’s appearance intermittently changed into one in which Lucy’s shimmering image materialised. That couldn’t be possible. She had been murdered by Juke. *Hadn’t she?* His mind must be undergoing some odd behaviour in the hope that Lucy would re-emerge and this horrible nightmare would evaporate. *Could it really be true that she was gone for ever!*

“Sorry you’ve had to wait so long. I’m Rachel. I’m a nurse on this unit, and I’ve been delegated to look after you. We had a real emergency and it was all hands to the pumps, as you might say. Not like your little problem. Don’t worry, though. The doctor will be along in a minute. I think she wants to just double check for herself, rather than take my word for it.”

“Will she be long?” asked Adrian.

“Oh, are you in a hurry? Is your bus leaving soon and you’re worried you’ll miss it?”

“No, it’s just that I want to go and check on someone. His daughter has been brought in. She died and I want to make sure he’s alright for the moment.”

“Don’t worry. I was only joking. I think the doctor will be along quite soon. I know the unit where your friend will be. He’s probably sitting in the waiting area, but I doubt the hospital staff will welcome you up there. They’ll be busy enough without your clod hoppers to add to their work load.”

“Look, I’m sorry. I don’t want to make a nuisance of myself. But the young lady who has died was rather important to me too. Maybe I can come back later.”

Rachel smiled. “Oh, I didn’t realise. Was she your girlfriend?”

“Yes,” replied Adrian. “She was murdered by her ex-boyfriend. It was all very traumatic. But I don’t want her father to cope on his own.”

“You must be very upset and anxious. I’ll go and see if I can chivvy the doctor along. I won’t be long.”

Adrian stared at the floor as the tears started to roll down his face. His mind wandered aimlessly; he had been crying at the loss of Jemima when Lucy had found him; he was crying again, this time because of Lucy, and there was a risk that Rachel would come back and see him. And the doctor. What would they think? All he seemed to do was indulge in water works. He had tried to be strong for Lucy, defending her from Juke’s gang, amongst others, but instead he had exhibited such weakness. How could he ever think he would be able to protect her. Such naivety. Such stupidity. How was he going to be able to cope?

“You see. I told you I wouldn’t be long.” Adrian looked up slowly through his bleary eyes to see that Rachel had returned, accompanied by another lady, who he assumed was the doctor.

“I’m doctor Julia Ayesgarth. I believe you’ve been in the wars.”

“Yes,” whispered Adrian. “I hit the person who murdered my girlfriend. I don’t know what the problem is with my hand.”

The doctor took Adrian’s hand and asked him to perform various exercises with it. Although the pain killers had dulled the pain, he winced in agony each time he undertook each activity.

Dr Ayesgarth looked at him. “Don’t worry. I don’t think anything’s broken. It looks like you’ve just got a few bruises. No permanent damage. Just take it easy for a few days, and if you keep taking paracetamol it should be okay. Right, I’d better go and see the next patient. Nurse here will discharge you.”

Dr Ayesgarth swiftly disappeared around the side of the cubicle, and Adrian could hear her voice as she addressed the patient next door. All that waiting around for a two minute visit from the doctor. And he could have spent the time with Shaun. The thought of Lucy's father being on his own at such a time seemed terrible. He should have company.

"When I went off to find the doctor," said Rachel, "I also made enquiries about your girlfriend and her father. What's his name?"

"Shaun. He's a lovely man."

"I'm sure he is," answered Rachel. "It seems that he has got someone with him. Apparently, his sister arrived about half an hour ago, so you don't need to worry. He's not alone."

On hearing this, Adrian slumped in his chair and not only did the tears recommence, but his body started to convulse. "I didn't know he had a sister," he said.

He felt hugely relieved that Shaun had someone with him, but he had hoped to join him. At least for the moment. That way he wouldn't have been alone either. Yet, he couldn't disturb the family now. After all, he was a relative stranger. Shaun would want to grieve with his sibling. But Adrian didn't know how he was going to cope. In the space of a few hours his life had changed from a happy, cloudless horizon with a magnificent woman to one of dark bleakness and isolation.

And then he remembered that he was due to return to work tomorrow. How could he do that? He couldn't even focus on his current surroundings without bursting into tears, let alone interacting with clients and their highly complex tax affairs. His boss must have made alternate arrangements for one of his colleagues to cover for him whilst he was on holiday. *Surely that could continue? Couldn't it?*

Rachel's voice disturbed his misery. "I should really go and see the next patient, but would you feel like telling me what happened? It might help."

"I doubt it, but I'll try," and Adrian found that once he had begun speaking, it was as if the wall of a damn had been demolished, and the reservoir behind was suddenly released to explore the surrounding area with complete abandon. He started with Jemima's departure from his life, his trip to the hotel and how he met Lucy. He moved through the various days they'd had together, and ended with her violent murder, and the shock of realising that he faced a desolate, solitary future.

Rachel took hold of his uninjured hand. "You have had it rough, haven't you. What do you do for a living?"

“Oh, that. I’m an accountant. Actually, I’ve had a fortnight off, and am due back tomorrow.”

“I don’t think you’re fit for work at the moment. You really do look very pale.”

Oh, do I?” responded Adrian. “I haven’t looked in a mirror for what seems a very long time, and yet it was only this morning after I had a shower.”

Rachel was silent for a moment, and Adrian could see that she was thinking about something. “Have you got someone to stay with tonight?” she eventually said. “I don’t think it’s safe for you to be alone.”

“No, I haven’t. My parents live a long way away. Now that Jemima has left, there’s no-one around here.”

“Hmmm,” said Rachel, thoughtfully. “Well, it certainly wouldn’t be safe for you to drive to your parents with your hand in that condition.”

“No, I don’t suppose it would. And my car is back at the farm, anyway.”

“I shouldn’t really do this, but you can stay at my flat tonight, if you like. I have a flat mate, Phoebe, but she’s away on her honeymoon for three weeks. She went this morning, so you could use her room for the moment. How do you feel about pretending to be a female for a while?”

Adrian looked at the floor for a moment as he started to feel overwhelmed at Rachel’s kindness, then glanced up and smiled wanly, “I think I could live with that.”

“Now that’s much better. You’re really very good looking when you can be bothered. Wait till my friends find out that you’re at my apartment. They’ll be dead jealous.”

“Are you flirting with me?” asked Adrian.

“Oh, definitely. I’m hoping that it’ll cheer you up a little. And of course, you’ll have to pretend that we’re going out with each other. I’ve just split up with my boyfriend, you see. I’m awfully worried that my street cred has taken a knock. I’m normally known as a man-eater.”

“In that case, you have to promise to be gentle with me. I might be a little tough to gobble down at the moment.”

“So, you *have* got a sense of humour!” said Rachel. “Yes, I think we’ll get along fine for a while. You can cook my meals and clean my flat while I’m out at work. I’ve always wanted a domestic slave.”

“Yes, miss. Although you’ll have to help me get accustomed to obeying orders.”

“Of course. That’s why I keep a whip at home. Don’t worry. That will bring about a change in your attitude more swiftly than you can imagine.”

“Will I get any time off, or will you keep me at these chores continuously?”

“Hmmm. That’s a difficult one. I wouldn’t want you to think I’m a soft touch. I tell you what. I’ll fit a ball and chain around your ankle occasionally to give you a little more mobility when you go out.”

They both laughed. “Could be just what I need. Someone to keep a close eye on me,” replied Adrian.

“To be serious, though. I’ll be due off shift shortly, so we can go and get your car. There’s a garage in the basement of our block of flats where you can store it, if you want. It has some spare spaces for visitors. I think it should be safe for you to drive a short distance.”

“Oh, I’ll need to ring my boss about having a little more time off. I can ring him after I’ve got my phone. It’s in my car.”

“Oh, don’t worry. You can use mine now. I won’t need it for a few minutes. I won’t have finished my shift till then. I’m guessing your boss will still be at work. Office hours haven’t quite ended yet.”

Chapter 13.

Adrian took a deep breath. Rachel had just left, saying she only had one more patient to see to, then she would get changed and they could leave. The squeeze of his shoulder just before she departed had been very comforting. The feeling of loneliness wasn't quite so strong, at least for the moment. He didn't have to face the next few hours by himself. Lucy had helped him after Jemima had gone. Now Rachel was offering him kindness following Lucy's dreadful fate. He'd never encountered such generosity in the accounting world where he had spent so much of his life. All that mattered was maximising the revenue he earned from clients.

He dialled Josh's number. Thankfully, he'd always had a good working relationship with his boss, and there hadn't been any hesitation in authorising the two weeks' holiday that was coming to an end which he'd hoped would help him recover from Jemima's departure. A quick conversation to which Josh had responded by saying, "of course. I've noticed how your health has got worse. You can start with two weeks and see how you get on. But just keep me informed."

"Hello. Josh speaking. How can I help?"

"Hi, Josh. Its Adrian."

"Oh, hi mate. I didn't recognise the number for a moment. Are you okay? You still sound a bit rough."

"No, I'm feeling dreadful. I'll tell you about everything soon, but to cut things short, I met a girl, Lucy, at the start of my holiday, and things were great. Then this morning she was murdered by her ex-boyfriend. I think he was high on drugs. I'm in hospital, and one of the nurses, Rachel, has let me borrow her phone. They've said I'm not fit to return to work."

The line was silent for a moment, then Josh deeply sighed. "That's terrible, buddy. Of course you can have more time off. I'll authorise it tomorrow morning when your current period runs out, but it sounds like you might need significantly more after that. Shall we say four weeks to start with, but there'll be no problem extending it if it's needed. Same condition as before. Just keep me informed."

"Thanks, Josh. I'd better go now. The nurse has just returned." He pressed the button to terminate the call, and placed it on the little cupboard.

"All squared at work?" asked Rachel.

"Yes, he's given me another four weeks, and more if I need it."

“Right, let’s go.” answered Rachel. “We’ll go straight to this farm and collect your car. I think you’ll be able to relax a bit better after that.

As they moved through the traffic, Rachel turned the radio on. Some pop music tinkled quietly as she revved and changed gears, or braked according to the demands of the road conditions. Adrian vacantly looked at the streets as one progressed into another. Other drivers were honking their horns at cyclists who rode across red lights. Busses remained stationary for inordinate lengths so that the queues of passengers had the time to pay their fares. Pedestrians rushed across the roads in between the slow-moving vehicles, as if it was acceptable to risk their lives in order to get home a couple of minutes earlier. Adrian briefly wondered if their families would think the risk was worth it if a disaster happened.

His mind moved on to the journeys he’d shared in Lucy’s jeep. The crunching gears. The door that needed a string to be grasped to prevent it flying open. The engine that needed to be revved for at least two minutes for it to be suitably warmed up. In contrast, Rachel’s little hatchback smoothly navigated the route, doors and other parts of the vehicle efficiently and effectively performing their duties without any manual intervention.

Eventually, they reached the farm, and her car squelched through a couple of puddles and came to a stop immediately behind his own. Everything seemed so still. So peaceful. It was as if the horror that had been enacted this morning had never happened. The only evidence was that the door of the barn where he had been working was still open.

Rachel’s voice brought him back to reality. She had got out and stood looking at his vehicle. “Now that’s what I call a car. It must have cost you a pretty penny, or was it a gift from one of your previous rich girlfriends?”

Adrian laughed briefly. “No, I’ve got a decent job, that’s all. You can see it wouldn’t have been very practical on the farm and the roads around here, so we didn’t use it very much. We used Lucy’s old jeep most of the time. Oh, god. That’s it, over there.”

“Come on. Let’s go. I think we need to get out of here. You can follow me back, and I’ll show you where to park.”

“I just want to leave Shaun a note,” he said. “I won’t be a minute.”

He climbed inside his car and reached into the glove compartment in front of the passenger seat to extract a note pad and a pen. He ripped a piece of paper out of the booklet and started to write. The pain in his

hand was excruciating, but he somehow managed to get through the ordeal.

“Shaun,

A friend has just brought me back to collect my car. I hope everything went smoothly at the hospital with Lucy. Please give me a ring to tell me how things went.

Your good friend,

Adrian”

After he had pushed the paper through the letter box, he walked over to the barn to shut the door, then climbed into the driver’s seat of his motor. He looked around the sleek plastic interior and the leather upholstery, and remembered the time when he’d last taken it out. That was to the farmer’s market, where he’d yet again encountered the type of ruffians that had blighted Lucy’s life. He shook his head in a bid to get rid of the ghosts, and pressed the starter button. The usual gentle purr commenced, as if to say, ‘where have you been? I’ve been getting bored just sitting here.’

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After Rachel had given him a cuddle and said goodnight, Adrian got into bed. As he lay there, he fought back the tears. He couldn’t rid himself of thoughts of Lucy. He dreaded the idea that he might feel the same protracted desolation as he’d undergone after Jemima had exited his life. It had lasted for months. And yet, what could he do? Admittedly, his attachment to Lucy had been what was popularly called a whirlwind romance. Well, there was nothing wrong with that. It was just a fact.

To try and distract himself, he looked around the room that the little bedside lamp illuminated. Various pieces of furniture were highlighted, and interacted to produce strange shadows against the walls. One displayed the shape of a face that was projected by the way the luggage on top of the wardrobe it sat on was positioned. That piece of furniture was clearly quite old, probably second-hand, and had been painted cream and white by someone much more recently; presumably Phoebe, Rachel’s flatmate. There was a white chest of drawers in another corner, above which had been placed a small mirror to provide a space that could facilitate the application of makeup. Certainly, there were various bottles and compacts that appeared to hold those kinds of substances.

The bedside table was obviously an antique, and had patterned lines that swirled around its front, as if they were a snake trying to escape its confinement. The top was protected by a tray so that liquids that might leak from a mug wouldn’t cause any damage to the timber surface, and

the lamp next to it had a tasteful frilly white cover underneath it, clearly for the same reason. He was in a double bed that faced the door, with a window a little to the side of the headboard. The purple curtains which had yellow stripes running through them were pulled. Yes, he thought. It was a very cosy place.

His dark thoughts returned, despite his efforts to prevent them. *Well, that didn't work in trying to divert his mind. Would nothing ever alleviate this pain?* Here he was in a comfortable bed, and Lucy would be lying in hospital on a slab. He suddenly shivered. The nightmares recurred and he whimpered. He would never be able to have another cuddle from her. He'd never be able to smell her perfume and the refreshing shampoo she used. He'd never be able to enjoy the look on her face as she sipped at the coffee he'd made for breakfast. And he'd never be teased by her again.

Rachel was being very kind, but how long would he be able to stay with her? Well, he knew an answer to that. At most it would be just under three weeks till Phoebe got back and he'd need to return to his empty apartment. And all the reminders of another lover. Jemima. Would he still feel anything for her after encountering such happiness with Lucy, or would his desolation double?

The future seemed dark. Black. A hell with no end. There must be some way to exit these thoughts and feelings, but he couldn't think of anything. And then there was the prospect of recommencing work and the pitying looks from his colleagues, with no Jemima or anyone else to go home to. Emptiness in every corner of his existence. For ever.

He began to cry, this time as if the rapidly flowing tears could wash away reality. Then, he started to shudder, and the whimpering began. He sat up and rocked back and forwards to try and provide some comfort to his bleak mind. Would nothing ever help?

"Are you alright? I heard your sobbing, but you should know that the bed squeaks when you move in it like that. I always knew when Phoebe and Dan were at it. It comes right through the wall. I've made a cup of hot chocolate for you. Would you like it? I've got one as well. I always find that comforts me when I'm upset."

Adrian slowly looked up. "Sorry. You shouldn't have brought me back. You must see enough suffering at work, and now you have it at home too."

"Oh, don't worry about that. I wouldn't have gone into that kind of job if I hadn't wanted to help people. Anyway, you haven't answered my question. Would you like this hot chocolate?"

"Yes, please."

“Here, budge up. I’ll get in beside you for a while to keep you company.”

“Oh, you don’t need to do that,” replied Adrian. “I’ll probably be okay”.

“That’s not the reason. I’ve got to check you don’t spill your drink all over the bed. Phoebe would never forgive me if you ruined her things while she’s away.”

Adrian laughed, and took a gulp from his cup. “Is this still a form of rough treatment to help me get better?”

“No, it’s to condition you for the hard work you’re going to have to get used to. Don’t forget, I’ll be expecting the ledges to be dusted, the carpets vacuumed, and all of the dishes washed and put away.”

“Oh, I see,” and he laughed again. “I’d forgotten about all of that. Fair enough, though. You did warn me while we were still at the hospital.”

Rachel took Adrian’s empty cup, put it on the side table and turned round to face him again. He had remained upright so that he could drink the hot refreshment, but had fallen asleep in that position. “Oh, right,” she whispered. “I think I’d better stay with you tonight.”

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Adrian was awoken by the sunlight as it streamed through the curtains. Rachel was lying on her side, her eyes wide open as she watched him.

“I managed to get you lying down shortly after you zonked out. You certainly slept well. That’s good. Do you feel any better?”

Adrian turned his head and looked at the ceiling. Through her kindness, by staying with him Rachel had allowed him to spend a peaceful night in which he hadn’t had any dreams. He hadn’t thought that that would have been possible. Just like Lucy. She had also taken him in and looked after him, leading him to her bedroom and passing the time in hours of passion.

“Yes, I think I do. I hate the idea that I might have put you out, but it’s very kind of you. I don’t know how I‘d have coped. Do you ask many patients back like this?”

She laughed. “No, only the good looking ones.”

“So, I’ve been singled out for special treatment?”

“No,” she answered. “Only semi-special treatment. Luckily for you, the previous person moved out last week.”

“I thought this was Phoebe’s room. Do you have another spare room?”

Rachel laughed. “Who says I get them to stay in a different bed? You really do make a lot of assumptions.”

Adrian smiled. “Sorry, you’re right. Guilty as charged. So, what time do you have to be into work today?”

“I was only joking about that last night. I’ve just finished a long period of morning shifts, and before that I had two days off after ending another week of lates. I’ve got several days off now, so I don’t need to rush anywhere. Aren’t you a lucky boy. I’ll be around to keep an eye on you for a while.”

Again, Adrian went quiet. He felt some of the anxiety flow away at the thought that he wouldn’t be on his own for all of that period. He might have to go and visit Shaun soon to check that everything was alright, but the urgency of that wasn’t quite so acute, now that he knew his sister was staying with him. Maybe it would be best if he left it a few days before going round, so that Shaun could deal with his emotions in his own way. And, of course, there would be the endless paperwork that always accompanied deaths. That could be quite harrowing, but, again, it was something he was sure that Shaun would prefer to process without the distraction of a relative stranger turning up. Possibly a phone call would be better to start with, after all.

He turned his head to Rachel. “I know a way that I can start to make up for the kindness you’ve shown me. My new coffee machine was in the boot of my car, and I brought it up with me last night. Shall I make breakfast?”

“Yes, please. I really like good coffee. But before you do that, I think you need to perform another duty. I’ve been sharing a bed with you all night, and you haven’t touched me. You’re too good looking for me to let the opportunity pass, so now I’ll have to take over. Prepare to enjoy yourself. You said you want to start to pay me back. Well, here goes.”

Chapter 14.

Adrian sat at the table in the little café, waiting for Rachel to bring the coffees over that she was currently queueing up to buy. She had been gone several minutes, and it looked as if she would be quite a while yet. The line snaked along the serving hatchery, and a few feet further towards the door. Seemingly, those that stood at the rear of the row were mumbling to their neighbours about how slow the service was. He heard a couple of comments that cast negative aspersions on the apparent leisurely and selfish nature of the attendants, but from what he could see, they were doing their best in the understaffed conditions in which they laboured.

He looked around the space. It was certainly very cosy. There were a few rows of tables and chairs, for the most part each one occupied by a single customer who had ‘bagged somewhere’ as they awaited their compatriots to arrive with the refreshments. Others who already had a tray full of sustenance stood around, obviously lurking in the hope that somewhere might become available soon before their drinks got cold.

There were large plate glass windows instead of solidly constructed external walls, each of six or eight feet in width, stretching from the floor to the ceiling. A humorous image briefly entered his mind in which a football was mis-kicked by a youngster outside and smashed through these barriers, disturbing the roof which collapsed onto the customers below, dust and rubble mixing with their food. He gently shook his head to rid himself of these silly thoughts. The signs on the lawns outside clearly stated that games were prohibited. Hopefully they would be obeyed whilst he and Rachel were there, he briefly mused.

The ceiling was dominated by pine planks, the interspersed beams stretching away from a central dome to the edges of the chamber, and it was obvious that someone in a previous era had tried to apply a preservative varnish. However, this endeavour had clearly not been repeated as he could see that some of the shiny covering was starting to peel. This enhanced the venue’s overall appearance of slow decay. That was a shame. It was evidently popular and its demise would be sad.

Adrian looked over to see that Rachel was now about half way along the queue, so his mind drifted back to the earlier parts of the morning. The adventure that she had initiated in bed proved that she was both a determined and energetic person. She had managed to induce him into two repeat performances before she allowed them both to get up and take some breakfast. The horizontal exercise had been exhausting, and he remembered being surprised how skilled Rachel had been in encouraging him to new heights of excitement on each occasion. As it cascaded down his body afterwards, the shower’s warm water had certainly been very refreshing.

He reminisced on the different experiences he'd had with both Lucy and Rachel. Making love with Lucy had been slow and a way of sharing their joint affection, each working with the other to climb towards the peak of emotion. With Rachel it had been more like a rugby scrummage; frenetic and robust, with both combatants rising to momentary but ecstatic experiences.

He smiled. Breakfast had ostensibly been a simple affair consisting of toast, orange juice and coffee, and should have taken but a moment. Yet, the meal had been somewhat extended as Rachel savoured the concoction that he had produced from the machine he'd retrieved from his car, asking for two more helpings before her appetite for caffeine was quenched. Yes, her culinary gluttony was as voracious as her sexual one, and exhibited a positive enthusiasm for life that he admired.

As they'd neared the park, it had been difficult to find a space in which to leave the car in the surrounding streets. Thankfully, this task had been made much easier by Rachel's insistence that they bring her small hatchback, which fitted into the single spot that had eventually revealed itself. And even then, it was so small that he'd needed to get out and guide her manoeuvres to prevent an accident.

As they'd walked through the gates and into the public gardens, Adrian remembered thinking that he and Rachel seemed to have undertaken a lot of activity that day up till this point, and his emotions were already subdued due to the overwork they'd endured. Yet, nothing could have prepared him for the splendour that was about to hit him, and in hindsight he was amazed how his senses had coped with so much additional stimulation.

There were lusciously green lawns that were so neatly manicured that he wondered whether one member of staff dedicated all of their working hours to keeping them in such pristine condition. There were a variety of flower beds dotted around, the flora consisting of highly coloured red, yellow and orange tulips, interspersed in one place with the delicate white droplets of Lilly of the Valley, and in another with the stunning blue of hyacinths. The scents that this cornucopia emitted was bewildering, fighting each other in an apparent battle to dominate the onlookers' senses.

Some of the trees were clearly of ancient lineage, their thick trunks and low swooping branches covering vast expanses of the ground underneath their boughs, as if they were undertaking a plan to gradually expand and dominate their surroundings. Other arboreal species had obviously been planted more recently, their seeming diminutive and weak stature conflicting with their vibrant determination to vigorously grow upwards in an effort to compete with their larger neighbours for the brilliant rays from the sun that beamed down from the blue sky.

On entering the park, they had wandered quietly around many of the paths, soaking up the magical atmosphere that the grounds staff evidently conscientiously laboured to provide for visitors. Eventually, they had reached a lake and descended onto one of the seats that provided a perch from which people could admire the activities of the many birds that fought and survived in this watery corner of nature. The swans graciously glided across the surface, confident that their larger size would guarantee them dominance over the copious quantities of food. However, the smaller creatures clearly had a more difficult challenge, brawling and scrummaging to obtain a proportion of the bread thrown by an enthralled and adoring public. Children screamed and shrieked in delight as a couple of geese climbed onto the bank, feathers dripping, to collect the morsels of sustenance, and transfer them to their nearby goslings.

After sitting there for a while, Rachel had said, “all this exercise is making me peckish. As you can’t provide for my more basic needs here and now, I’ll accept something to eat and drink instead from the café over there.”

“You are incorrigible,” he had replied. “How do you cope with your long periods of shifts? Surely your sex life takes a break at that point.”

“Of course it does. I’m normally so tired that I can’t think of anything apart from eating, and then going to bed to cuddle my teddy bear.”

“I didn’t know you had a cuddly toy in your bed. What’s it like?”

“It changes from time to time, depending who I’m with at the moment.”

Adrian had laughed. “Well, at least we can see about your tummy,” and they had wandered over to the coffee shop.

At that moment, Rachel’s voice returned him to the table where he sat.

“I’m sure that assistant took a dislike to me,” she said as she put the tray down and sat opposite him. “Maybe I was mistaken, but I could have sworn that she rolled her eyes every time I asked for something. And when she was standing next to one of her colleagues at the machine that churns out the drinks, I was sure that I heard them whisper something about how horrible I am. Yet, I don’t remember ever having seen them before.”

Adrian glanced at the two young ladies behind the counter. “They look about your age. Could they have been at school with you?”

Rachel looked over at the assistants again. “Actually, I think you might be right. I recognise the one with the blond hair, now you mention it. She’s

called Carys. In the last year at school after we'd taken our 'A' levels, she claimed I stole her boyfriend at the end-of-year disco. I didn't of course. He came up to me and asked me to dance, and we spent the rest of the evening together. He took me back to his parents' house afterwards. They were on holiday at the time. It seems that Carys had been bossing him around, and he'd had enough of it. He was going to leave her soon anyway."

"And what about the other one?" asked Adrian. "Do you remember her too?"

Rachel briefly glanced over at the other assistant. "Hmmm. Yes, I do, now that I've looked at her again. I remember now. Her name is Valerie. It was in the previous year. You know, the first year of our 'A' level course. I was going out with a chap in our class called Roger. All the girls liked him. One day I found Valerie and him in the sixth form common room. They were alone, and as I entered I heard Valerie flirting with him. Of course, when I confronted her, she denied it. Anyway, the next day we were in the school canteen and she left her lunch unattended for a moment while she went to get a glass of water from the dispenser. I had brought some laxatives from home, and slipped a double dose into her coke. For the following week she wasn't able to stay in class very long, but the toilets saw a lot of her."

Adrian puffed his cheeks as he blew out some air. "From the way she was treating you just now, she must have somehow found out what you did."

"Yes. A couple of days later, I left an anonymous note in her hand bag. It warned her not to mess with other people's boyfriends. Of course, she couldn't prove that I'd left the message, but she must have guessed. I mean, it couldn't have been difficult to figure that out, when you think about it. And she clearly told everyone else in the class. She tried to get her revenge in the next school hockey team practice. We were both members. I had to watch my shins as she tried to whack them a few times, but she always missed. No-one ever tried to steal any boyfriends from me again."

"I'll need to watch out, then, won't I? I'd hate to get on your wrong side and upset you."

She laughed. "I wouldn't be sharing a bed with you, if there was a chance of that. Anyway, you're far too good looking to even consider doing anything like that to."

"How many boyfriends have you had, or have you lost count?" he asked with a smile.

Rachel sat quietly for a moment, obviously giving the matter some thought. "To be honest, I've never considered it. If the boy seems right,

then I make sure he notices me. They've always become interested in me after that."

"So, even though I was clearly rather upset, and focused on other matters, I didn't stand a chance?"

"Yes, I guess so, although it wasn't as simple as that. I really did feel sorry for you at first as well. You obviously needed looking after, and I took pity on you. It wasn't until we got home and I gave you that cuddle before you went to bed that I wondered what you might be like to have sex with. It was a bit frustrating to have to wait till the morning to find out, but I forgave you. As I said. You're far too good looking to get annoyed with."

"Well, I am very grateful to you for what you've done. I really don't know what would have happened without your help. Will I be able to stay another night?"

Rachel looked intently into his eyes. "You can stay more than that, if you like. I'm serious. I caught my last boyfriend snorting drugs at a party we were at just before I started my long stretch of shifts. I ignored him for the rest of the evening, but to be honest, I don't think he noticed; he was so spaced out. The batch he took must have been doctored and so was stronger than usual. But he shouldn't have been taking them anyway, and I had warned him to keep off the stuff. When I got home, I dumped him by text, and then I blocked him on my phone and on social media. So, things have been a little quiet since then. It'll be nice to have the company. It's almost three weeks till Phoebe gets back from honeymoon, so you can stay till at least then. I don't know whether Dan's moving in to our flat, or if they're going to find somewhere else together. It's all a little up in the air. We'll see how things go, shall we? It might get a little crowded with three or four of us in the flat after that, but you never know how it will turn out." She paused briefly and smiled. "And, of course, you're good company when you're not moping around."

Adrian laughed. "You really are terrible. But, thanks for allowing me to take Phoebe's place temporarily as your flat mate."

"Oh, don't get the wrong idea. You're not going to continue as a replacement for Phoebe and use her room. You're moving in with me. I'll feel more comfortable about the frequent sessions we're going to have if I'm in my own bed. In fact, I think we should go now. I need some dessert, and they don't allow that sort of behaviour in these public places."

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Adrian was sitting in the lounge of Rachel's flat. It was a comfortable room, he thought. No, lived in. That was it. The settee was the sort you

sunk into and was slightly worn, and the cushions were a bit crumpled through long use. The yellow curtains added a bright tone, but looked like they needed a wash. It wasn't that they were dirty. It was just that they had a similar appearance to everything else; well worn. There was a fire place directly in front of the couch, but the aperture that would allow for access to the grate was covered over with a piece of thin wood, obviously to keep any drafts out. Well, the radiators from the central heating system had obviated the need for the flames of olden times. On top of the mantlepiece, there were a couple of photos of more mature couples which he assumed to be Rachel and Phoebe's parents, together with two small ornaments that had slight chips or cracks in them. The one item that differed was the television. It looked totally unused; as if it had just been taken out of its box. He pondered the matter. Not surprising, really, as the girls presumably got their entertainment over the internet, just like everyone else of their age.

His mind cast back to their return car journey to her apartment. They had remained quiet, and she had taken his hand and placed it on her leg before they pulled off, saying, "I can't hold your hand while I'm driving. That will have to do instead." After entering the property, she had pushed him into her bedroom, promptly undressed him and shoved him on the bed, and then got to work. The session was as frenzied as the one earlier in the morning, and it was a while till they came up for air.

As he relaxed in the sitting room, he reflected on their love-making. She really was a remarkable young woman. She seemed to live in the moment; enjoying those things around her on the instant the mood took her. Such a contrast to Lucy, who took things at a much more sedate pace. And Jemima before that, who spent so much time focused on her work, treating their physical coupling in a more intelligent manner, as if it were an academic exercise. Well, not entirely. She still showed a great deal of passion too.

He still missed Jemima. Yes, more than he could imagine. All those shared memories, and the settled future that they had agreed on. Everything had seemed so certain. A marriage. A move to a bigger property. Two children who would attend nursery at the first opportunity so that both of them could pursue their careers. Lots of anticipated promotions, and an eventual retirement to spend their twilight years by sharing some hobbies in a comfortable companionship.

And then there was Lucy. Despite the short nature of their relationship, they had discussed his migration to join her on the farm and help with the rural chores, and a marriage. They would luxuriate in the beautiful countryside that surrounded her cottage, and eventually retire to the coast. She hadn't wanted any children, so they would have devoted their lives completely to each other.

His mind roved onto Rachel. She dominated his thoughts and emotions when he was with her. He smiled. And his body. She didn't leave any space for anything or anyone else in his life. She was like a tornado. However, she had asked to be left alone for a while to catch up with some friends via social media, and her absence from his immediate physical presence had allowed the thoughts of Lucy to return. He had come into the lounge so that he could have a little privacy in which to ring Shaun.

Adrian wasn't sure what he could do to support Shaun, but he wanted to try and do something. Shaun had immediately welcomed him into the family and Adrian knew that he would always be grateful for such a speedy and emotional attachment. It had allowed him to put a little distance between his existence at that time, and the past that had been dominated by his prior devotion to Jemima.

He picked up the phone, dialled Shaun's number and waited for the voice that he would eternally associate with Lucy. The bell sound continued for a while, then the voice mail announced itself, ending with the usual words, "please leave a message after the tone."

"Hello, Shaun. It's Adrian here. I was just ringing for some news. Sorry I didn't come up to the hospital floor you were on before I left. I very much wanted to, but the nurse that was attending to me said that your sister was there, and that it might be best to leave the family alone for the moment. I hope that was the right thing to do. If you could ring to update me, it would be brilliant. And, it goes without saying; if there's anything I can do, you must tell me immediately."

He terminated the call, closed his eyes, focused on the tears that began to roll down his cheeks, and started to shake and rock back and forth again. When Rachel found him an hour later, he was curled up in a foetal ball on the settee, the extensive damp patches on the surrounding material clearly evidencing his distress. She rushed over, took him in her arms and stroked his head.

"Don't worry. It will pass eventually. You obviously need to have another sleep. Why don't we go to bed, and you can cuddle up to me again."

"Yes, that would be lovely," he mumbled.

Chapter 15.

They were sitting in the kitchen in Rachel's flat, finishing breakfast. She closed her eyes as she swallowed the last dregs of the delicious coffee Adrian had made. Her face took on a dreamy appearance, as if her mind had drifted off to a distant paradise, where no-one had to work for a living, and could sit around all day enjoying these kinds of refreshments which were freely available.

After a few moments she seemed to resurface in her own apartment, and looked at Adrian. "That was truly lovely. I could swear you're getting better all the time at making that coffee. Anyway, have you looked out of the window this morning?"

He smiled. "Yes, when I opened the curtains after you'd beaten me up in bed again. Is there something special I should have noticed?" he asked.

"I didn't beat you up. Well, I didn't deliberately beat you up. I was getting some practice in for our marathon bout tonight. But I'm worried about your stamina. You sometimes get tired before I've filled my appetite, and then I'm left feeling a little peckish."

Adrian laughed. "I keep telling you you're a slave driver."

She raised her eyebrows in mock severity. "As long as you continue to obey orders, things will be fine. Anyway, you can always say 'no'."

"Would it do me any good?" he responded.

"No, not really. Don't forget I'm a nurse. I know a lot about the body and I'm quite prepared to use that knowledge to get what I want from you. But, that's not what I meant. Didn't you notice anything when you looked outside?"

"Hmmm. Let me see. The other buildings hadn't been swept away by a tornado?"

"You're not very observant, are you?" she answered. "How could you miss the fact that there isn't a cloud in the sky? It's a beautiful day. I want to go to the beach. Are you interested in coming along?"

"You really are spontaneous, thinking of that whilst I'm still munching on toast. But it sounds like a good idea. The only trouble is that I haven't got my trunks with me. Only an old pair of shorts that I stuffed in my bag before leaving my flat." He went silent for a moment, and a cloud of sadness seemed to darken his mood suddenly as he started to drift back to the reasons why he hadn't returned, and all that had happened since. He sighed. "You know, that seems like a very long time ago."

Rachel went round the table from her seat at the opposite side, sat on his knee and gave him a hug. “I know it’s hard, isn’t it? It’ll all pass eventually, but in the meantime, we can indulge ourselves by going to the beach. I think it’ll distract you, and it could be fun.”

“Of course, you’re right,” he said.

“And don’t worry about what to wear. Shorts and a scruffy t-shirt will be fine. Dan, Phoebe’s boyfriend, sorry husband, has left some flip flops which I think will fit you.”

“Yes, it’s a good idea,” he replied. “There’s just one more issue, though.”

She raised a questioning eyebrow. “You’re not trying to cause problems, are you?”

“Not really. It’s just that you’re sitting on my knee. I can’t move anywhere, let alone go to the beach until you get off me.”

“Just for that, I think I’ll need to punish you again before we go out.”

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As it was a workday, and the long school summer holidays hadn’t yet started, the journey down to the coast was relatively event-free and the traffic was quite light. Well, except for one incident. Rachel drove her little hatch back at a steady, relaxed pace in the slow lane of the dual carriageway. Well, he mused, there was no need to rush. The beach wasn’t going anywhere, and the lovely weather looked like it had settled in forever. They had completed about half the distance when a car passed them at what seemed to be a speed that might allow them to take off and fly away if the occupants had put their hands out of the windows and started to flap. Well, actually, one person had put a part of their anatomy out of the front aperture on the passenger side, and as the machine swooped passed, the loud singing that could be heard promoted the merits of a particular football team in an extremely slurred tone.

As the motor disappeared into the yonder, Rachel gasped as a police vehicle whizzed past, sirens and blue lights arrogantly warning the world to keep out of its way. About three miles further, as they calmly continued their trip, Rachel and Adrian passed both participants of the extraordinary adventure at the side of the road. Both the civilians were sitting on the grass verge, their heads held in their hands, half drunken bottles of beer lying to one side as the liquid slowly oozed out. The policemen were both red in the face with rage, as they apparently busied themselves in shouting and gesticulating at their captives.

They arrived at their destination shortly afterwards, and didn't have any problem finding somewhere to park in a back street. As they walked along the front towards a space that would allow them access to the shore, Adrian glanced at the white buildings that lined the road that stretched along the other side. They were arranged in a continuous façade, grand porticoes attempting to impress any visitors who might approach the dark wooden doors. The sash windows that symmetrically dotted themselves up each property's three storeys seemingly looked at the glistening scene before them, their disinterested look emanating from having no interior backlight to provide any sense of life.

They descended some concrete steps and started to wander. Adrian was carrying the borrowed flip flops in his hand, and as he moved along the beach, he felt the sand grind between his toes. The sense of freedom from the cares of the world caused by not wearing anything on his feet was delicious. It was as if the removal of footwear also temporarily cast aside his association with the heavy burdens that the world insisted on squashing him with.

He looked along the wide spread of the wonderful vista before him. The golden granules stretched away for what appeared to be forever. Certainly, he couldn't see where they ended, except that in the far distance there were clearly some cliff faces casting a dark presence over the horizon. Otherwise, the sun spread its rays over the scene, giving a brightness and cheerfulness to the place, and every so often it glistened off a shard of transparent shell.

The mid-week timing meant that there weren't many people about; mostly individual parents, accompanied by their very young brood, and some more mature visitors. Some of the kids were intent on seeing how far they could use their toy spades to dig into the sand, perhaps in an attempt to reach some distant relative in Australia, he mused. That was certainly the kind of tale his parents had told him as a youngster to try and keep him occupied. Other children were splashing in the water, giggling and screaming in excitement as they threw handfuls of liquid over each other.

He turned his gaze to the sea. It had a wonderful crystal blue hue, and he was sure that he could see some movement beneath the surface. Could that be caused by little creatures who were fighting nature's daily battle for survival, albeit a sub-aqua one? He sighed as he turned his attention to the waves that were gently rolling in from the vast ocean, and lapping softly on the shore.

He tugged Rachel's hand and pulled her towards the surf. "Come on," he said. "I want to walk just inside the water. When my parents took me to the seaside, the other kids would usually be playing games, but I spent hours wandering just inside the waves."

“Did you always pass a lot of time on your own when you were young?” she asked.

He thought for a moment. “Sometimes. I didn’t have any brothers or sisters, and we lived in a rural area so the nearest neighbours were quite a distance away. So, there were times when I was alone. But I enjoyed it back then. I had plenty of friends at school, and our parents often dropped us at one of the other kids’ houses for the day during the holidays. We spent hours pretending we were soldiers and fighting out life and death scenes we’d watched recently on television. Hedges, or dips in the ground, provided good hiding places. But my solitary moments were magical. It gave me the chance to imagine all sorts of things, just like a lot of boys do.”

“It sounds like a happy childhood. What was the thing you most enjoyed thinking about at those times?

Adrian went quiet for a few minutes while he gave the matter some thought. “I remember a particular documentary I saw on TV. I must have been about ten. It featured somewhere in Africa where the locals were desperately short of food and at risk of dying. The announcer said that the problem was caused by the unusual amount of hot weather and the lack of rain, and I felt extremely sorry for them. I vowed to send my pocket money to the charity that the programme featured that was helping those poor people. I did that for about four weeks until I went back to school when the holidays ended. Just before I did, I remember walking along a country lane, and finding at that moment that the images of all those people suffering hunger and thirst made me feel the same, so I turned round, ran home and attacked the contents of the fridge. Of course, that’s something that those in the film couldn’t do.”

“That’s quite a profound reaction for a ten year old,” said Rachel. “Our house was persistently busy, so I never had time to have those kinds of thoughts. My parents didn’t earn much, although they worked long hours. My dad even had two jobs. My grandparents also lived with us, but they were very frail so my two sisters and me had to look after them before and after school, as well as doing a lot of the other household chores. They died when I was eighteen and in my last year of school, but I think it was seeing them and all the suffering they endured because of the serious ailments they both had that made me want to become a nurse.”

As they continued to slowly wander along the shore and away from the most popular area for what felt to Adrian like several hours, various scenes played out. Some more children wandered around with their buckets, occasionally placing a shell in them after having spent an intense period searching. The pails often rattled as the contents were jolted by the budding conchologists. At other places adults sat on loungers, reading books while their earbuds ensured that the audible

evidence of the world's existence was kept at bay. Eventually Adrian and Rachel reached a place where strands from a couple of rocky outcrops projected several metres onto the sand, and they jumped in surprise as the naked sunworshippers squealed in embarrassment from their hidden positions at the duo's sudden appearance.

As they passed out of earshot, Adrian smiled. "Well, they were certainly at one with the elements. Let's hope they don't get too intimate with nature, though. It might be very uncomfortable if the environment's small golden particles get into their innermost crevices. It's a long way to walk back to civilisation if sand is unhelpfully grinding away."

Rachel chuckled. "I'm getting a little tired now. Would you mind if we start back? Maybe we could treat ourselves to an ice cream from that booth. They looked wonderful."

As they turned and retraced the footprints they'd left on the golden beach, Adrian couldn't help teasing her. "I thought you had a much greater stamina than that?"

"Hmmm," she replied. "It's a different kind of stamina when you're in bed. But don't worry. An ice cream will fully rejuvenate me. You're not getting away from earning your keep that easily."

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As they sat on a wall at the rear of the beach, Rachel swung her legs as she took another lick of the ice cream in her cone. She had ordered for them both, choosing double scoops of Strawberry for Adrian and Raspberry Ripple for herself. They'd only been bought a few minutes previously, but the sun's heat had already had its effect on the cold delicacy. Drips had begun to run down the outside of the cornet.

"This is such a lovely place, and I've had a wonderful day," she said as she snuggled into the side of Adrian, who put an arm around her. "Thank you."

"It was more than my life was worth to refuse your order this morning to come here. But it has been lovely."

Rachel pretended to hit him. "I think I made the right decision when I brought you home from the hospital," she smiled cheekily. "You're certainly good at meeting my demands in bed, but you're also really good company."

"I was initially extremely grateful to you for your kindness in rescuing me," he replied. "I really don't know how I would have survived after Lucy's death. Now I'm starting to grow fond of you. But I've been

wondering about something. Have you really taken lots of guys back to your flat from the hospital?”

She turned her gaze from the glowing and stunning scene that lay before them, looked at him and gave him a light kiss on his cheek. “No,” she whispered. “Only you. I really have been teasing you about having a constant flow of men through my bedroom. I try to keep a professional distance from my patients. It’s been thoroughly drilled into me over the time I’ve been doing my job. As I said to you before, I initially felt sorry for you, but there was also something beyond your sorrow that strongly appealed to me. I don’t think there was any way I would have left the hospital that day without taking you home with me. And now I’m finding that my feelings towards you have grown stronger too.”

“I think that’s what I was trying to say a moment ago. My initial gratitude is taking a more sentimental direction.”

She snuggled even closer into him, and he squeezed her shoulder with the arm he had around it. “Let’s not talk any more about that for now. Let’s enjoy the sunset,” she said as she pointed to the right. “Look over there. The sun’s started to turn the sky red and yellow.”

“And now there’s some orange. Boring, isn’t it?”

They both laughed.

Chapter 16.

“Once again, the light streaming through the curtains awoke Adrian. He was lying on his side and opened his eyes to see Rachel resting next to him, quietly reading a magazine. There was something innately sensual about her. The set of her mouth, maybe. Or could it be the way she held her head? Well, it didn’t matter. He had slept through the night again without waking up. Despite her passion for life, she had subdued her energy and stayed next to him to provide such warm company.

“You must be hungry,” he said.

“Ah, so you’ve surfaced at last. That was another good sleep. Well done. It seems to have done you good. You’re right, I am hungry, but I think we should have something to eat first. We didn’t have anything before coming to bed, and you zonked out immediately and deeply, so I didn’t want to disturb you.”

Adrian laughed. “You really are terrible. Yes, let’s have some breakfast, and I’ll make some coffee.”

“That will certainly distract me for a while. You should have been a barista instead of a boring accountant. But you will have to earn your keep after that.”

“It’s a deal,” replied Adrian and laughed once more.

After they had consumed their toast and orange juice, Rachel sighed deeply as she slowly devoured the coffee. A quick but vigorous return to bed was followed by a playful spell in the showers together, and whilst they were drying each other, Rachel said, “I want to take you to meet Hannah, a friend of mine from school. I’ve agreed to see her at that tea shop on the high street. You know the one, Askins.”

“Yes, I know it, but I’ve never been in. Did you go boy-hunting together, or something?”

Rachel finished towelling Adrian down and then started to get dressed. “Well, we did, but that’s not what really brought us together. Her mother died just after she finished her ‘A’ levels, and over the long summer holidays before I started my nurse training, I went round to her house to help out.”

“Oh, that’s dreadful. Her mum must have been very young.”

“Yes, she was only in her forties,” answered Rachel. “It was sudden. A heart attack. Her father was awfully distraught, as you can imagine and he went to stay with his brother for a while, so Hannah was left on her

own during that period. So, I think my company was very important to her."

"You really do have a deeply caring streak. Very appropriate for a nurse, and I've certainly benefitted from it."

"Yes, I think you're right. When I feel so sorry for someone, it blocks out everything else. Strange, isn't it?"

"Oh, despite what you said at the beach, maybe I should be worried," replied Adrian. "Am I only a temporary fitting around here until the next project appears?"

Rachel turned, stood on her toes and kissed him. "No, you're far too good looking for that. And I really am starting to like you very much."

Adrian smiled. "Yes, I'm definitely starting to fall for you too."

She reached up and kissed him again. "We don't need to rush anything. We've got plenty of time to grow together. Come on. Let's get out of here."

***

Once more, Adrian sat at a table whilst he waited on Rachel getting the drinks. Hannah hadn't arrived yet, so he looked around the place. It had a kind of old-fashioned appearance, he decided. There wasn't anything in particular that made him think that, but just an overall impression. The walls were freshly painted in white, and were densely covered in pictures which seemed to be water colours. Some were of seaside scenes, one or two showing kids splashing around in the surf. Others were of the countryside, water flowing through wooded glades or vast open fields with colourful insects and butterflies buzzing around verdant green hedgerows. Underneath each one there was a little price tag, obviously indicating that they were for sale.

The large plate glass windows were misted up with condensation, presumably from the breath emitted by the large number of patrons who had chosen that time to slurp and munch their way through drinks and cake. And, of course, the tables were all covered with the usual white cloths, on top of which were small vases inside which were plastic flowers of different hues. There was only just enough space between the customer groupings to give a vague impression of privacy, but despite this he could clearly hear the discussion of those people around him, if he chose to do so.

Rachel's voice retrieved his mind from its observations of his surroundings. "Thank goodness the queue wasn't as long as the one at the café in the park, and the assistants were more polite. I've got us a

coffee, and one for Hannah. It definitely won't be as good as the ones you make, but it'll have to do. I really have been spoiled."

Adrian laughed. "I assume you didn't know the assistants?" he asked.

"No, they're quite a bit younger than me. Look, about what we discussed in the bathroom."

"You mean the emotional bit about us starting to like each other?" he asked.

"Yes, please don't tell Hannah. I know her very well. She'll want to spend the time getting more details out of us, and to start trying to plan our futures. But I want to focus on her instead. She's going through a rough patch with her husband, and I want to see if I can help."

"Oh, no," answered Adrian. "Another victim of modern romance. Do you know her husband well?"

"Dominic? Yes, I was Hannah's bridesmaid. I know him very well. I liked him at first."

Adrian laughed, and she looked at him and smiled. "No, not in the way I like you. He seemed gentle, and I thought they'd be good together. He very clearly loved her."

"How long have they been married?"

"The wedding was two years ago," she replied. "Actually, I've not heard from her since just after the honeymoon. I never gave it much of a thought. You know how life just takes over and friends are often neglected. But there's always been a strong bond between us."

"I'm not surprised, after you helped her when her mother died. She's the one who made contact recently, though, didn't she? I wonder what triggered that."

"Well, I don't really know, but from the tone of her voice on the phone I suspect that they're having marital problems. I'm quite worried if I'm honest."

"I'm not surprised. Jemima and I lived together for longer than that, and it floored me when we split up."

Rachel reached over and touched him on the arm. "And then you lost Lucy. You've really been through it."

Their conversation was interrupted by the ting of the bell attached to the outside door that announced the arrival of another customer.

“Sorry, I’m a little late,” said Hannah. “So, you’re the famous Adrian?” She held out her hand as she sat down, and they shook, then she looked at Rachel. “You said he was good looking, but you didn’t say he was as handsome as that.”

Adrian’s face went red. “Oh, look at that. I’ve embarrassed him. How sweet,” said Hannah.

“I can see why you two are best friends,” said Adrian. “Neither of you have any trouble speaking your minds, do you?”

Both girls laughed. They all took a swig of their drinks, and Rachel pulled a funny face. “I’ve got used to Adrian’s coffee. It really is marvellous. This stuff is awful in comparison.”

Hannah stared at the table top for a moment, obviously lost in thought, then looked up. “I have to make my own these days.”

“That’s odd,” replied Rachel. “He was always making you hot drinks when you lived together before you got married. What’s happened?”

“Are you sure you don’t mind me burdening you?” asked Hannah.

“Definitely not. That’s what best friends are for.”

“Would you like me to go?” asked Adrian. “I can imagine I might inhibit your conversation.”

“No, dear,” answered Hannah. “Please stay.”

Rachel stared at her friend, and reached over to touch her arm. “Oh, no, has he started hitting you?”

“No. At least not yet. The problem is that he tells me what I can and can’t do.” She looked into Rachel’s eyes. “That’s the reason I haven’t been in touch since the wedding. He stopped me doing that. It started shortly after we returned from honeymoon.”

“I can’t believe it,” said Rachel. “That’s terrible. I never guessed he was like that.”

“Yes, I know. The only reason I’ve been able to come out this morning is because I’ve got a day off work and he’s gone away on business till tonight. But I can’t stay long as he’s left me a pile of chores to do before he gets back.”

Rachel sighed. “I am so sorry, Hannah. I wish I’d made more effort to contact you before now.”

“Actually, it’s probably just as well you didn’t,” answered Hannah. “I really don’t know how he’d have reacted. He doesn’t like me going out without him, or having any phone calls. He controls everything, including the energy and internet companies. I can’t even do that.”

“I was going to invite you back for lunch, but I don’t suppose you’ll want to do that, will you?”

“I can stay a bit longer, but I really need to get back soon. Now, tell me how you two met.”

Rachel looked at Adrian. “It’s a bit complicated. Do you want to tell her?”

“Yes, as she’s your best friend, I think that’ll be fine,” replied Adrian, and he went on to describe his experience with Jemima, and then the circumstances surrounding Lucy’s death.

Rachel interrupted. “I was assigned to look after him when he came into hospital to have his fist looked at. You can see how good looking he is, so I couldn’t let him get away. So, I chatted him up and then took him back to my flat.

“Oh, how is Phoebe?” asked Hannah.

“She’s fine, but she’s away on her honeymoon. She got married a few days ago, so the place is empty otherwise. Just as well really. I’ve got him to myself, and the peace is good for him.”

Hannah laughed. “You’ll never change. You still live for the moment, don’t you! So full of life. I can’t imagine anyone being able to convince you to marry them.”

Adrian went red again. “Oh, have I stumbled onto something here?” asked Hannah.

“No, not really,” replied Rachel. “It’s just that after we got out of the shower this morning, we both mentioned that we’ve started to fall for each other. It’s too early to say anything else.”

Hannah’s eyes dropped to the table cloth again, before looking up at her friend. “You’re so passionate about everything that you do, and always focus on the current moment. I’m not sure what’s going to happen with me and Dominic, but do you mind if I ring again when I get the chance? I don’t want to disturb you both and the fun time you’re both clearly having.”

Rachel sighed. “You should never doubt that we are still best friends, and I’d be hurt if we didn’t stay in touch, now that we’re back in contact again.” She looked at Adrian. “And you wouldn’t mind, would you?”

“Definitely not,” he responded. “I’ve had my share of bad experiences recently, and have benefitted from someone being there for me. Lucy helped me after Jemima and I split, and Rachel’s supporting me now.”

A tear rolled down Hannah’s face. “Thank you,” she whispered, and then more loudly. “Look, I’d better go. Those chores won’t do themselves.” She looked at Rachel. “I’ll give you a ring soon.”

***

That evening Adrian made dinner, and then they decided to finish the bottle of wine in bed that they had started with the meal. “It sounds like Hannah’s in a bad way,” said Adrian. “It must have taken some courage to come out and meet us this morning.”

He looked at Rachel who was evidently lost in deep thought. “Yes,” she replied. “I really would never have thought it possible that we could both have misunderstood Dominic so badly. He seemed devoted to her. I’m really worried about her.”

“I’m not surprised. She’s obviously enduring a horrible time.”

Rachel slowly nodded her head again. “Yes, she was so lively before she met Dominic. And I was so envious of her when we were at school. She was always at the centre of any fun, and the boys seemed to positively drool over her. She just had to snap her fingers and they’d come running. And now she’s so subdued. It’s so unlike her.”

“Do you think you’ll be able to see her again soon? I’m sure she’d appreciate that.”

“I really don’t know. On the one hand I’d love to. I feel really sorry for her. On the other, I might cause more problems.”

“You’re going to have a difficult job suppressing your sympathy, and desire to help. It’s such a strong part of you.”

Her sad face looked up at him. “Yes, you’re right. I’ll have to think about what’s best.”

“Well, in that case, I think I’d better give you the same cure that you’ve applied to me when you felt sorry for me.”

He held her in his arms, and their ensuing love making was more gentle than the normal boxing match. “Thank you for being with me today. I’m

glad you've met Hannah" she whispered before she started to nibble his ear with fervour.

Chapter 17.

Adrian sighed deeply. Rachel had just rolled off him, risen from the bed and gone off to have a shower. En route, she'd answered the phone's insistent ring and from the initial few comments and the anxious tone he was able to hear, he assumed it was Hannah. He could fully understand how Rachel would worry, given the terrible experience her friend was having with her husband. The fear of looming violence must be dreadful.

The potential of physical harm that Hannah was enduring reminded him of Lucy, and the times he had protected her from the various thugs who had threatened her. He shuddered to think what might have happened if he hadn't intervened at those moments. Would she have been murdered even earlier? Possibly not. The idiots had claimed their menaces emanated from his relationship with her, so she may have been safe. And yet Juke had clearly been a brutal person as well as extremely possessive. It seems likely that he would have come back to reclaim her sooner or later, whether she was engaged in another romantic connection or not, and then Lucy's suffering would no doubt have commenced at that point.

He started to see pictures of her lying there in her own blood again, the pain and fear clearly visible on her face. He remembered how helpless he had felt. Even crippling Juke hadn't really achieved anything substantial. And then Shaun had arrived, and Adrian recalled how Lucy's father's utter despair had compounded his own desperation. The wonderful future that had seemingly stretched before them had been snatched away so swiftly.

A tear started to run down his face as he once more imagined Lucy lying on a cold slab in the hospital, and Shaun experiencing substantial trauma as he sat in the waiting room. Adrian started to wonder if he should have gone up to sit with Shaun during those moments. He might have been able to offer some support. He shook his head. No, it was unlikely. Shaun's emotions would have been so shattered that it seemed questionable that a relative newcomer to his life could have made any difference. Anyway, Shaun's sister had arrived quite quickly, according to Rachel.

Yet, none of these thoughts could bring back the lady he had hoped to spend his future with. He started to sob, the whimpering following quite swiftly. At that moment, Rachel wandered in. She started to say "that was Hannah on the phone," but on seeing Adrian's distress she got into the bed beside him, and gently pulled his head towards her and started to stroke his brow.

“You’re still very fragile, aren’t you,” she said. “You’ve suffered a great deal. It’ll go eventually. I’m sure of that, but in the meantime, I’m going to help you through it.”

Adrian’s weeping abated slightly. “I don’t know what I’d do without you, and I don’t know how I will ever be able to repay your kindness.”

Rachel tutted. “You’re doing a fine job of that. First, there’s all that effort you lavish on me in bed, and second, you supply me with the most divine coffee. Speaking of which, I feel the need for you to express a little gratitude, both here and in the kitchen.”

Adrian made an attempt to smile. “I really am your sex slave, aren’t I?”

“That’s better. It’s not easy to have a rugby scrummage with someone who’s miserable.”

***

Once again Rachel opened her eyes after mentally returning from a trip to utopia. She put the cup down on the table and looked at Adrian. “Well, that’s your duty done for the moment. Now you can take me to the fun fair.”

Adrian groaned. “Oh, no, not another spontaneous decision. Are you sure that it’s a good idea to do something else based on one of them so soon after the last one? I mean, look how disastrous a time we had at the beach.”

She looked at him, pretending to be stern. “You’re lucky you’re not within reach, or you’d get a clout.”

He laughed. “Actually, I don’t think I’ve ever been to the fun fair before. I saw the adverts in the local paper saying that one had come to town. Is it for a special occasion?”

She sighed. “You really are exasperating. Of course it is. It’s for the local celebrations for the anniversary of the charter that founded the town, granted several hundred years ago by one of those medieval kings. I can’t remember which.”

“Sorry, I do sound rather ignorant, don’t I? I have always been too busy at this time of the year working on client’s affairs to notice it. There are very important tax deadlines in a few overseas jurisdictions where quite a few of them have money stashed away. Anyway, why not. It should be fun. Do they come every year?”

Rachel smiled. “I suppose that’s fair enough. And yes, they do come every year. It’s very popular, particularly with families. And this good

weather that we're having at the moment means that there should be quite a lot of people there."

"Okay, I'll go with you, but on one condition."

"Go on then. What now?"

"If you see any other deserving cases that engage your sympathy, you don't bring them back here to replace me." He paused for a moment, as if considering the point. "Actually, I've changed my mind. I think I should encourage you to do that. It might share the burden you impose on me. It could give me a rest from these constant demands."

"I've had enough of these complaints. I think I need to punish you again. I feel another rugby scrummage coming on."

***

Adrian found that as soon as they walked through the entry gates to the fun fair, a wave of noise hit him. As expected, there were the squeals of delight from multitudes of children as they were whisked high into the air by giant machines, bobbed up and down as they pretended to be cowboys on the wooden horses on the roundabout that took them on a circular journey, and as parents gifted to them the surprise presents that had just been won at one of the stalls or the mock firing range where plastic ducks presented themselves for target practice.

As Rachel had forewarned, the place was packed. It was probably just as well that the entry fee provided a pass that gave unrestricted rides on all of the features. The queues at each event would be even longer otherwise, as proceedings were delayed so that fares could be taken, change given and tickets issued. They were already long enough.

He looked around. There were a multitude of attractions. He could see one which was evidently devoted to attempting to turn customers' hair white in fear at the ghosts they would encounter as their little train trundled along its tracks. It was clearly very popular, the punters' expectations of the forthcoming feature presumably enhanced by the greeter's costume. He had a long black gown on, similar to those worn by monks of olden times, with a huge hood hiding his face.

Another man processed a line of eager patrons carefully, ensuring that they were all safely positioned in their capsules before being hurtled up and down the roller coaster's rails, undulating high in the air in such a violent manner that Adrian was surprised that some didn't fly out of their seats in an apparent trial to defeat one of the enduring laws of nature. He smiled. Gravity always won those sorts of competitions. Just as well those harnesses were secure.

However, the Ferris wheel's sheer size meant that it dominated all of the entertainment, and the queue for that attraction was particularly long. Many people had cameras firmly strapped round their necks. Well, it's not surprising, really, thought Adrian. The lenses on phones these days could be very good, but for a truly magnificent picture of the far-reaching views that the pinnacle of the wheel must give, something more sophisticated was evidently preferable.

Rachel tugged at his hand. "Come on. Let's see what you can win me on the shooting range."

Given the size of many of the other features around the grounds, this one was relatively small. It consisted of a wooden hut about ten feet high and twenty long, with a gap at the front ranging from one end to the other. There were a variety of fluffy toys; teddy bears; pink pandas; cuddly mice; and a huge soft rabbit with two red hearts shapes where the eyes should have been.

They wandered over, and after Adrian had shown the ticket, the owner handed over a rifle. Adrian took careful aim and pressed the trigger, and watched as the first shot hit one of the plastic targets, which fell backwards and disappeared down a gap at the rear of the hut. He fired again, and again, until he had sent all five of his bullets hurtling into the ducks, leaving gaps in the row that processed along the metal pole that moved them across their deathly terrain.

Adrian looked at the owner. "I enjoyed that. I'd like to have another go please."

"You've done well, sir," said the chap. "You're clearly a natural at this. But I don't think I could afford for you to try again. I've only got a limited supply of prizes, and they need to last all night."

Adrian laughed, selected the rabbit and presented it to Rachel, who gave him a huge kiss and a cuddle. "That was amazing. I didn't know you were so skilled." She moved closer to his ear, and whispered, "but don't worry, this little toy won't replace you in bed. At least not totally."

He laughed again, and whispered back, "you said you get tired when you're on a long shift pattern at work, and only have the energy to take a teddy bear to bed with you. This rabbit will give you some variety as a nighttime companion." She pretended to hit him again.

They went on several other rides, including the ghost train. When they finally trundled out of that one, they were in fits of giggles. "Did you see that skeleton?" he asked. "It had a sticker on one of the ribs saying 'made in China'. And the air they blow to make the ghost seemingly come alive blew the sheet off the frame."

“I know,” replied Rachel. “My favourite was the Frankenstein. The head was wobbling, presumably because one of its neck bolts was loose.”

“Let’s go over there. I’d like to try the Ferris wheel.”

There was a brief lull in the queue, so they were directed to one of the cars, and the employee reached over to ensure that the safety bars were fully secured across their laps. “As our capsules aren’t covered with glass like those in other fairs, we have to take extra care to make sure you don’t have an accident. Whatever you do, don’t try and stand up. It could get a little messy down here otherwise when you fall out.”

The wheel started to jerk a little as it shifted forward and upward slightly to allow other customers to enter the next pods, but eventually Adrian could see that the chap in charge was satisfied that everyone was ready, and he watched as the owner pulled a lever. They commenced a smooth but measured ascent, and gradually climbed towards the pinnacle of the machine’s rotation.

“Wow, look at that,” said Rachel. “We must be able to see for hundreds of miles.”

Adrian laughed again as he scanned the panorama. “Look, there’s the hospital,” she said. “And that’s the town hall. They look so small from up here.”

His gaze roved over the vista. It truly was magnificent. He felt as though he could reach up and touch the sky. The people below were busy navigating the crowds, dragging screaming kids through the noise or trying to eat their candyfloss or toffee apple without losing it through being joggled too much. He smiled as he noticed one gentleman take his handkerchief out to wipe the ice cream out of his hair because someone else had tripped and the treat had fallen out of their hands.

“This is amazing,” said Rachel. “I think I can see the seaside where we went the other day. There’s a bit of a haze in that direction, though, so I’m not entirely sure.”

Adrian put his arm round her, and gave her a squeeze. “It was a great idea of yours to suggest this.”

She looked at him, smiled and gave him a quick kiss. “I’m so glad you came along. The rest days in between my shifts have never been so much fun. I’ll have to thank you properly when we get home.”

“No, its me that owes you a huge amount of thanks for saving me.” He gulped. “I really am falling for you.”

“Not literally, I hope. It’s a long way down.” She saw his face drop, and realised that he had misunderstood her comment as trying to change the subject, and gave him another kiss. “Don’t worry, I’m feeling the same.”

Adrian felt his mood lift, gave her another squeeze, and looked out to the distance again. “I can see some hills over there. Do you know what they’re called?”

“Oh, yes. I went there with Hannah once, when she passed her driving test. We had a day out to celebrate. The middle one’s where we went. It’s called Senzar Hill.”

Adrian went pale as he let out a scream and started to shake. “Oh, god,” he said almost inaudibly. “I went there with Lucy”.

Rachel stared at him for a moment. “Oh, no. When we get down, we’ll go home. We’ve had a lot of fun here, and been on loads of rides, but I don’t think you’ll be in a fit state to go on any more. It’s starting to get dark, anyway, so it’s a good time to leave.”

It seemed to both of them that the wheel took forever to reach the ground, and Adrian’s trembling worsened. Rachel held him tightly in her arms, but on this occasion it didn’t work, and the tears started to roll.

“Is he alright?” said the employee, when they had finally descended and got out of the cubicle. “He looks really rough. The height affects people like that sometimes.”

“No, the ride was fine. We just need to get home quickly.”

“Oh, right. I tell you what. You’ll have trouble getting through all these people. I’ll get my sidekick, Dave, to show you another exit out of here. It’ll be much quicker. I hope he gets better soon.”

“Thanks,” said Rachel.

Chapter 18.

Adrian sat in the lounge waiting for the phone call to connect. Rachel had seen that he was feeling a little down as they had munched on toast and marmalade at breakfast, and had suggested that he try phoning Shaun again in the hope that it might lift his mood if he got through. Well, it can't have been difficult to detect, he thought. His emotions had always been easy to read because he had such an expressive face. He sighed. He had been like that even as a child, allowing his mother to identify on his return from school whether she needed to give him a cup of sweetened drink to boost his energy levels.

The line connected and the ringing sound returned his mind to the call, and as he waited for it to be answered, he started to look around the room again. It was lovely at this time of the day. Even though the view out of the windows was of the two houses across the road and so was a little dull, the sun was streaming in, glinting off the shiny surfaces of the ornaments on the mantlepiece. At one point, Adrian had needed to wince due to the onward reflection as it had hit his eyes.

His attention was returned to the small electronic device he held in his hand by the outgoing message from the voicemail. Not again, he thought. "Please leave your message after the tone," it impartially instructed.

"Hi Shaun. I thought I'd try to reach out to you again. I'm getting a little worried for you. Please could you give me a call to reassure me that you're alright, and to let me know if there's anything you'd like me to do. Anything at all."

After pressing the 'off switch', he wandered through to the kitchen where Rachel was sitting with her eyes closed, clearly savouring the warm and exploding flavours that were overwhelming her taste buds from her second cup of Adrian's coffee.

"Any luck this time?" she asked.

"Nothing. I hope he's okay. I'm starting to get really anxious about him. I'd drive out there to find out how things are except for the fact that I am worried that I might get in his way. I'll just have to take consolation that he might still have his sister with him."

"Hmmm. It's a difficult one." She took another gulp of her coffee and closed her eyes again, and he could see that the oral sensations of her drink had temporarily transported her to a distant place again. Then she seemed to re-emerge from her mental journey. "You could try later. He might be in then. Is there anything you would like to do today?"

“Yes,” he replied, “although I don’t know what you’ll think of this idea. On the way back from the tea shop where we met Hannah, we passed the theatre and I saw an advert for a lunchtime concert. It’s a brass quartet and they’re playing a couple of pieces I know.”

“What’s a brass quartet?” she asked.

“Oh. A quartet is a music group of four players. In this case, they all play brass instruments which will probably be two cornets, a tenor horn and a euphonium. A friend of mine at school called Selina played the euphonium and went to a top conservatoire to study it. I haven’t seen her for years, but I used to like listening to the group she played with all that time ago. What do you think?”

Rachel looked at Adrian for a moment. “I think you’re too good looking for me to say ‘no’. We can have a sandwich before we go to see it.”

“Good idea. I hope you’ll like it.”

***

As he sat in the pews, Adrian looked around the auditorium. It was quite a modern construction, he thought. In shape, it was like a long rectangle, with the stage at the far end, opposite to the doors that allowed the audience to enter. All of the walls were painted white, and of course there was the obligatory high ceiling to allow for good acoustics. He was surprised by the lack of windows, but then realised that it possibly facilitated the enhancement of the sound’s quality.

The seats rose up over about twenty layers, allowing the people to have a clearer view than was provided by those older halls where all of the chairs were behind each other on a level floor. In total, he estimated that about three hundred could be accommodated. The dais which would be inhabited by the performers had two long floor-to-ceiling curtains, one on either side, and the bottom of the stage was about six feet higher than the front row.

“There’s not many here, is there?” said Rachel. “The group can’t be very popular.”

“Actually, lunchtime concerts don’t usually get as many coming to see the performance as evening and weekend shows. And, of course, brass quartets aren’t as popular compared to rock groups. I think they’ve done quite well to have the place about a third full. And, don’t forget that recitals in the middle of the day don’t have an interval and are shorter than full concerts to cater for people who need to return to work.”

There was a gentle ripple of clapping. “Shhh,” he said. “Here they come. I hope you like it.”

The four players walked on stage, bowed to the onlookers, seated and started to play. Adrian noticed Rachel's reaction out of the corner of his eye. As soon as the first note appeared, she sat up in her seat and tapped her foot. Well, it's not surprising. The regular beat that was integral to this kind of march commonly had that effect on people.

During the applause that erupted when the music had finished, she whispered, "I had no idea that it would be so good. I could just imagine the army marching passed in full uniform on one of their parades. What's next?"

"It's a solo by the euphonium player. It's called 'Euphonium Solace'. I think it will be slow."

"Can you see whether it will be your friend playing it?"

"No," he answered. "We're too far away from the stage. I wanted to sit here as I think you can hear the music much better from further back, but it also means I can't make out their faces. Shhh. She's just about to start."

The introduction was commenced by one of the cornets, then the harmony built and subsided as the other cornet and the tenor horn joined and then dropped out again.

Adrian was vaguely aware that the audience seemed to be in a trance as the soloist entered, and effortlessly built their theme up into the beautifully mellow and passionate upper register of the instrument. About half way through, the initial happy major tones that had dominated the sound turned into a minor key and the mood of the listeners transformed from smiling approval to a dreamlike state, some faces having tears gently rolling down them. The final sustained note faded with a touch of vibrato at the end to sweeten it. Adrian noticed that the room was so quiet that if someone had dropped a pin, it might have triggered a revolt in protest at the atmosphere being broken. Then, suddenly, everyone rose to their feet, and the cheering was deafening.

Rachel leaned over to Adrian and kissed him on the cheek. "Thank you for bringing me to see this. I never expected such beauty to be produced by instruments made of metal."

"Just you wait till the fourth piece. I know that one. I heard it being played when I was a boy. 'Desert Sonata.' It makes you imagine the camels riding across the great expanses of the sand in North Africa, the tough living conditions, and the early deaths of the people who live there in the sun's unrelenting heat."

“Wow, that’s a colourful description of something you last heard several years ago. I’m impressed,” said Rachel.

Adrian laughed. “Sorry to disappoint you, but I’m just repeating what it says in the programme.”

Rachel smiled. “Show off.”

The group progressed through their eight pieces, and received a standing ovation from the audience when the last phrase finally ended.

Adrian and Rachel rose from their seats and followed the rest of the crowd as it emptied into the foyer. “Shall we sit on those seats over there and have a cup of coffee from the kiosk?” asked Adrian. “It’ll be my treat this time.”

“Yes, that would be nice.”

It didn’t take long for him to return to the table with the drinks.

After he’d taken his seat, he asked, “what did you think?”.

Rachel sipped the coffee. “Nowhere as good as yours.”

“No, I mean the concert.”

A huge grin spread across Rachel’s face. “It was brilliant,” she replied. “When I was younger, I used to hear my grandparents talk about how much they liked brass bands, but I never took it seriously. Now I want you to take me to another concert like that soon.”

“It’s a deal,” he answered. “But a full brass band is very different to the group we heard today. There would be twenty seven players including percussion instead of four. And it would also have a conductor, which we didn’t have here either. The sound would be much bigger, and the repertoire is a bit different to reflect the larger size of the ensemble. I think you’d like that too, though. My friend used to play in one of the top bands in the country when she was a girl and one of the school teachers took a group of us along to one of their concerts. I think I was about fourteen. I fell in love with the music back then.”

“What about the girl? Did you fall in love with her as well?”

“I suppose I had a crush on her, but I never really knew her. I couldn’t play anything so I felt too shy to talk to her.”

Rachel smiled. “I’m surprised she didn’t come up and talk to you, actually, given your good looks.”

Adrian went red again. “Oh, give over. Anyway, I looked very different back then, and my hairstyle was rather nerdish.”

The voice interrupted them. “Hello. Is it Adrian?”

“Oh, Selina. Hello. Very well done. We both loved your solo. This is Rachel. Would you like a drink?”

“No, thanks,” replied Selina. “I can’t stop long as the tenor horn player is giving me a lift. He’s collecting his car. I was just passing through here on my way to meet him out front, and couldn’t believe you were sitting there. I haven’t seen you for years.”

“No, I know,” he responded. “But I heard you play with that brass band when we were at school. It introduced me to brass music, and thankfully Rachel agreed to come and hear your concert today. Because of where we were sitting, I couldn’t see who the individual players in the quartet were. Have you been with them long?”

“Yes, we met at the conservatoire where I studied, and we’ve stayed together ever since. It’s my job now. We tour around quite a lot, both in this country and abroad. We’ve only got one more concert and then we’ll have some time off for a while, and to be honest I’m glad. We’ve been on an eight-week tour and it’s been exhausting. Anyway, what are you up to?”

“I trained as an accountant and now work for one of the firms in the city. But at the moment I’m off for a few weeks. There’s been a bereavement and it’s hit me hard.”

He looked at Rachel, who smiled and reached out to hold his hand. “Rachel’s been brilliant in helping me through it. I don’t know what I would have done without her.”

Selina looked at her watch. “I’m really sorry to hear that. Look, I haven’t got time as Bob will be outside with his car now, and there are parking restrictions there. But my address is 4 Hanson Crescent. You can find my phone number in the directory. Please do give me a ring, and we can have a better catch-up.”

Rachel watched as Selina rushed off, her instrument carry-case that contained her euphonium slung over her shoulder. “She seems really nice. Are you going to visit her?”

“I doubt it,” he replied. “I was too shy of her all those years ago, and I still feel intimidated by her now. Anyway, I prefer to spend my time with you. The kind of entertainment you offer is much more to my taste. And, well, as I mentioned before, I am really getting very keen on you. I hope you still don’t mind me telling you that.”

“Actually, I don’t mind you telling me that at all. I’m feeling very similar. And that was certainly the correct answer about whether you might go and see her in her flat.” They both laughed and shared a quick kiss. Come on. Let’s get home, and I can reward you for it.”

“What, another rugby scrummage?” he smiled.

“Yes, if you like. After all, the participants certainly get very intimate in those scrummages.”

Adrian pretended to complain. “Oh, well, back to the coal face, I suppose. Who says life isn’t all work and no play?”

Rachel laughed and pinched his arm. “Stop being cheeky, or I’ll make you suffer even more during the torture I’m about to inflict on you.”

Chapter 19.

Adrian got out of the car and waited for Rachel to park it in the sole remaining slot. The number of vehicles lying quietly for their owners to return gave an impression that the paths of the nature reserve they'd come to would be crammed with other hikers. Yet, he knew from having made many trips here previously, the area was so vast that they were unlikely to encounter anyone else.

He looked around the wonderful panorama that seemed eager to delight his senses. The edge of the huge lake was surrounded intermittently by tall and majestic trees that gave the impression of such an ancient lineage that they might have even provided shelter for the cave men, all those millennia ago. Their protective boughs provided shelter for some yellow shrubs that a number of birds seemed to find particularly attractive, many of them flying away with beaks full of foliage, presumably to add to their nests for their growing chicks. Others were returning to peck at the branches to gather different materials.

There were a few swans gracefully gliding across the water, their heads occasionally bobbing beneath the surface in an attempt to locate more sub-aquatic nutrition. These magnificent creatures mated for life, as far as Adrian understood, and, indeed, most appeared to be in pairs, little broods of cygnets chirping in apparent anxiety that they may miss out on the largess from their parents' efforts. However, he was sad to see a few solitary ones in the distance. He sympathised with them. He had already lost two partners. Maybe he was destined to similarly spend the rest of his life alone.

He looked up to see the brooding mountains as they stretched away into the distance. The ones in the foreground sloped down into the tarn as if the two geological formations were eager to form an especially intimate relationship. However, the further peaks had snow on their lofty tops, and were so high that Adrian felt they could be trying to shake hands with the clouds.

He sighed. When he was ensconced in his flat or at work in the city, it was incredibly easy to forget that such an amazing place wasn't too far away; a relatively short car journey, in fact. The beauty of the vista overwhelmed the senses so much that it was as if it had been created by a very talented artist. He hoped that Rachel liked it as much as he did. Otherwise, her desire to live life for the moment would mean they wouldn't remain here very long.

He briefly cast back to the time after they got up. The shower had been particularly good fun, mainly because Rachel had built up a lot of lather from the soap and started a foam fight. He smiled. At the end of the brawl, he had been covered in far more suds, so it was probably true to

say that she had won. Of course, the best bit was that she then methodically cleared all of the bubbles off him. Yes, he looked forward to the next detergent-related skirmish.

Breakfast had taken its usual course. Toast and marmalade were scrunched and fruit juice slurped. Of course, there was also the normal pause in proceedings whilst Rachel took her customary vacation from reality as she savoured the coffee that he had produced from his magical machine. He had enjoyed watching her pleasure as she mentally tripped around the stratosphere and back again.

“I’d like to make a suggestion about what we could do today. How do you fancy a hike through some rather stunning scenery?” he had said.

“That sounds fun. Is it far?”

“No, it’s the nature reserve just outside the city. I’ve been there several times. It really is beautiful.”

“Okay. Is there a coffee shop there that we can visit?” she had asked with a grin.

He had smiled. “I thought we could go for a walk. There’s a narrow road that goes around the lake, so the terrain’s not difficult.”

“I’ll give it a go. I can borrow Phoebe’s boots. She’s my size. She and Dan go there quite a lot, although I think they go up the mountains.”

“My boots are in my car. I left them there after the last time Jemima and I went out that way.”

Now, as he waited for her, his thoughts drifted back to the times he’d spent with Jemima, the lady he was previously planning on marrying and spending the rest of his life with. On the last occasion they’d come here, they’d taken a picnic and lost themselves in the vast landscape for a whole day. When they had finally returned to his flat, their cheeks were glowing red with exercise and the fresh air they’d indulged in. A tear came to his eye as he remembered her laughter as she poured the coffee out of the thermos flask while he pretended to nudge her elbow. He shook his head. He must try to stop reminiscing about those distant times that were still so raw. He was with a lovely lady instead now.

“That was a tight squeeze,” said Rachel as she approached him. “I had trouble getting these boots on. I’m not used to this kind of footwear, and it was more difficult than I expected. Here. I’ve brought our rucksacks.”

“You should be used to that. You get into enough tight squeezes with me.” They both laughed, held hands and set off.

They progressed along the road about two miles when they reached a kind of inlet where the side of the lake went round in a loop. There was a little beach which was littered with small stones, with each side of this feature being enclosed by the higher sides of a headland. The tops of these were covered with some trees that looked so wind swept that they leant at almost forty five degrees.

“Come on,” said Adrian. “Let’s go and throw some skippers. I did that with my parents on one of our few holidays. Do you know what to do?”

“No, I can honestly say I haven’t got a clue what you’re talking about.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll show you.”

As they went over to the foreshore, Adrian started looking down as if he was searching for something.

“What on earth are you doing?” asked Rachel. “You’re not likely to find any gold down there.”

He rattled some pebbles in his hand. “I’m looking for suitably shaped stones. They need to be flat. But I think that’s enough now.”

They went down to the water and Adrian leant slightly sideways and threw a stone in. They watched it skim across the surface, bouncing five times till it slowed and sank.

“Let me have a go,” demanded Rachel. “It doesn’t seem too difficult. I should easily be able to do better than that.”

Adrian handed her a piece and she lobbed it into the water, making a plopping sound as it sank immediately. He laughed. “Did you see a fish below the surface that you didn’t like and thought you’d try to hit it?”

“There’s no need to be sarcastic. Perhaps it’s a little more difficult than I expected. You do it again to show me.”

Adrian repeated his previous action, and the stone skimmed across the water, this time bouncing four times. He gave her another one and watched as it bobbed over the surface six times. “Beginners luck,” he said, grinning.

“Right, give me another one and I’ll try again. Maybe I should be giving you lessons now.” She tossed the stone, and it bounced seven times before disappearing into the murky depths.

“Now that we’ve established my superiority, we can carry on with our walk,” she said.

“I see. Fair enough. You don’t want to push it in case your beginner’s luck runs out.”

She pretended to hit him, then grabbed his hand and they returned to the road which continued in a straight line before bending round to follow the curve of the lake. “This really is stunning,” she said. “I didn’t realise it was so beautiful, or I would have come here before. Mind you, my last boyfriend wasn’t keen on the outdoors. He preferred to slouch on the settee with a can of beer and watch the football. He tried to get me to join him, but I refused.”

“Could you not have come out here with Phoebe and Dan?”

Rachel thought about it for a moment, and then slowly started to shake her head. “I don’t think they’d have minded, but it would have been like playing ‘gooseberry’, you know; two’s company and three’s a crowd. I wouldn’t have felt comfortable.”

“I can see that.”

They continued walking for a couple of hours, casually chatting. “What’s your job like?” she asked.

“I guess most people might think it’s boring. I mean, that’s the image that accountants have, isn’t it. It’s actually really interesting. You see, every commercial activity has a financial consequence. Customers buy something from a manufacturer, so that’s recorded as sales. The company then has to deduct their costs, like paying staff or a supplier for materials. Deducting one from the other reveals the profit, or loss, that the organisation has made. That’s shown in the profit and loss account, and the balance sheet gives the details of all of the assets like land, the factory, desks and tables, and the liabilities such as loans they’ve taken from a bank, or total amounts owed to those suppliers. So, examining the accounts provides a good picture of the health of the business.”

“It sounds quite easy, when you put it like that,” she said. “Is that what you do?”

“I used to. I’ve moved onto a specialism now. Loosely speaking, once the organisation has calculated its profit, it needs to pay tax on that. There are various things that can be legitimately done to reduce the amount of tax they hand over, like allowances for having bought new machinery. That’s where a tax specialist comes in. It’s an incredibly complicated area. So, the company hires them to advise them on the various exemptions available to reduce the amount they need to pay. I do the same for private clients, and try to identify legal ways of allowing them to keep more of their own money. That’s called tax avoidance. Where people use illegal methods, like failing to tell the tax authorities about some of the profits they’ve made, that’s called tax evasion.”

“Oh, I thought both were wrong.”

“No, avoidance is using all of the provisions that Parliament has says they want to be available to taxpayers, so it’s legal. Evasion is going outside of the law to hide money to try and reduce your tax bill. One’s legitimate, the other’s not.”

“Can you get my tax reduced?” she asked.

Adrian laughed. “Maybe, but if you’re employed by an organisation like you are, there aren’t many ways to legally achieve that. Actually, there was one interesting situation where a chap came in to see me who looked very sad, and was near to tears.”

Rachel smiled. “Was he a long-standing client and was sad because your extortionate fees over the years had bankrupted him?”

He grinned. “Not quite. Actually, I’d never seen him before. It turned out that he had been a wealthy businessman who had amassed his fortune by trading in the black market.”

“What’s that,” she interrupted.

“It means he bought and sold items but didn’t tell the authorities that he was doing it. All of it was, as you might say, unofficial. He’d spent the profits on acquiring an extensive art collection, including by some very famous artists like Renoir and Rembrandt. He used well known auction houses to buy them, so his collection became well known. He even started to lend many of them to museums, who spent a lot of money extensively advertising their temporary displays. Eventually the tax people caught up with him and sent him an estimate of the amount they said he owed.”

“An estimate?”

“Oh, that means they didn’t know precisely, so made a guess and then sent a demand for payment based on that. It was for a hefty amount, so he had sold all of his artefacts, even the ones in museums, so that he could pay up, in the belief that the estimate he’d received was valid. That was the reason he was so distraught. He’d loved his paintings and was proud that many of them had been in the museums and available for everyone else to see.”

“That really is a lovely thing to do. Shame he needed to get rid of them,” she said.

“As it turned out, it hadn’t been necessary. Following a recommendation from a friend, he brought all of his receipts and records of his sales to my

firm, and once I had prepared a set of accounts for him, it was clear that the tax estimate was completely wrong. He was able to reclaim ninety percent of the money he'd handed over, and started collecting again. If he'd have taken some professional advice in the first place, none of that would have happened."

"That's really sad," she responded.

"I know. What about you? Have you got any stories?"

She giggled. "It was a few months ago. A more mature chap came into A&E, accompanied by his beautiful young wife, complaining that he couldn't raise a smile, as you might say."

"You mean he wasn't able to engage in a rugby scrummage?"

She grinned and pretended to hit him once more. "I was helping the doctor at the time, and the patient explained that they'd tried to have sex the previous evening but he'd failed, yet again. The worst bit was that he'd had two friends over, a married couple, to stay for the night. They were in the next bedroom and made a lot of noise during their session. The patient and his wife heard everything and when he couldn't manage it, he became very embarrassed. The doctor questioned the chap for quite a long time, and carried out a physical examination behind a screen but couldn't find the trouble. All that was evident was a red rash on his stomach. As he got dressed a packet of pills dropped out of his pocket which gave the answer. When the doctor questioned him, it turned out that he and his wife had only been married a few weeks. Before their honeymoon he'd been worried about his capacity to please her."

"Oh, that seems a shame. Surely it would have been enough if they'd loved each other."

"I agree. But she was about three decades younger than him. So, that might explain his anxiety. Anyway, these pills turned out to be something that guaranteed to give an erection. The doctor checked the patient's records on the computer and found that he was allergic to one of the ingredients. That's why they'd been ineffective. The worst bit was that the chap had been so worried that the pills weren't working that he kept increasing the dose, but of course that made matters even worse. The allergy accounted for the red rash, though."

Adrian laughed. "Are you making that up?"

"No, it really happened," she replied.

As they turned another bend, they both saw the man lying at the side of the road, just next to a large boulder, his legs on the grass verge. After

Adrian and Rachel had rushed forward, she crouched down to examine him.

“I’m sorry, but we’ll have to finish our walk now. He’s had a heart attack. I recognise the signs. Can you call an ambulance, while I see if there’s anything I can do.”

Adrian retrieved his phone from his rucksack, and dialled the emergency number, 999. “Which service do you require?” asked the voice.

“Ambulance.”

There was a short delay, then a lady answered. Adrian took a deep breath before starting his explanation, “we were out for a walk, but we’ve found a chap. My girlfriend’s a nurse and she says he’s had a heart attack.”

“Just a minute, please,” said the voice.

“I’ve managed to find you through the signal on your mobile. You’re too remote to get an ambulance to. We’ll send the helicopter. It won’t be long. Is there anywhere to land?”

“Yes, we’re on a road, so I guess that should be okay.”

“Please stay with the patient until the helicopter arrives. I’ve notified the crew and it’s already on its way. Please put your girlfriend on so I can check that all the measures have been taken. It might save the patient’s life.”

Adrian passed the phone over to Rachel, who listened for a few moments. “Yes, I’ve already done all of that.… Yes, we’ll wait.” She then took off her rucksack and put it underneath the man’s head to provide some support, and removed her coat to put over him to keep him warm.

The call ended, and Rachel rose and looked at Adrian. “I’m really sorry about this, but I am a nurse and have to help where I can.”

“Of course. But you’ll get cold out here now. Why don’t we sit on that boulder and cuddle up to keep you warm. We can have our sandwiches as well.”

“That’s a good idea,” she answered. “Being that close will get me going, but I’m afraid we can’t get carried away. I need to keep an eye on him. We’ll need to have a scrummage as soon as we get home to compensate.”

They both laughed.

Chapter 20.

Adrian and Rachel sat at the breakfast table which was under the kitchen window. The room was a little dull as the sun streamed into the chambers at the other side of the property at this time of day, so the small wall-lamp had been turned on. They were chomping through the usual toast and orange juice, and Rachel was leaning back on the stool she occupied, her mind temporarily distracted from reality by the coffee she was savouring.

Adrian's mind briefly drifted onto the previous day, and the poor chap who'd suffered such a traumatic event in those amazing surroundings. Thankfully the helicopter hadn't taken long to arrive. The paramedics had swiftly reassured him and Rachel that the patient would eventually recover, before loading the stretcher aboard and streaming off into the blue yonder.

His attention returned to the present. This is a nice room, he reflected, as he waited for Rachel to return to earth from her caffeine-induced fantastical journey. Despite the slight gloom it experienced in the morning, there were copious amounts of work space surrounding the various appliances such as the cooker. The cupboard fronts were white, which seemingly fought a desperate struggle to cheer its surroundings up, and, he had to admit, achieved a degree of success.

Rachel's voice interrupted his musings. "I've only got three days remaining before I have to go back to work. It would be good to make the most of it, wouldn't it?"

"Ah, so you've managed to divert your attention away from your taste buds," he responded.

He received a quick kick to his shin. "Don't be so big headed. Mind you, it really is lovely coffee. But you haven't answered my question. Shall we go somewhere different today?"

"Yes, I've been thinking about that, actually. How would you fancy a trip to the local museum? I'm very interested in history, and they've got a special exhibition of artefacts from the era of Charles II, which was about three hundred and seventy years ago. It's one of my favourite periods."

"How do you know about that time?" asked Rachel.

"We covered it in my History 'A' level, and the teacher really brought it to life. I've admired Charles II ever since, and I continued to read bits about it after leaving school."

“It sounds a little dull, but how did you find out about this exhibition. I wasn’t aware the museum put on that sort of event.”

“I noticed an advert for it some time ago in the local newspaper, and thought at the time that it could be interesting.”

“Was that when you were seeing Jemima?” she asked.

“Yes. They advertise these things months in advance, but with all of the upset after I found out about her infidelity, I forgot about it till you mentioned doing something today.”

Rachel gave the matter some thought. “Yes, okay. Let’s do that. On one condition,” she said, smiling.

“Okay, what’s that, you little schemer.”

“That you give me a guided tour of the artefacts. I always find it really boring to look at lots of display cabinets that are all lined up with mouldy looking items inside. Obviously, someone must find them fascinating, but I can’t get excited about that sort of stuff.”

Adrian laughed. “You’re on. And thanks. Shall we go after I’ve cleared up here?”

Rachel gave another smile. “Well, maybe after a slight delay. I feel like another rugby scrummage first.”

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The hall they entered was just as Adrian had imagined it would be. The high ceiling gave a sense of space, and despite the lack of windows, the place was bright because of the extensive light fittings. He looked upwards. They certainly had taken every effort to maximise the illumination available to aid the visitors’ experience. This was enhanced by a number of benches scattered in the middle of the room. Well, he thought, there was so much to see that numerous people would welcome this facility. It really could be tiring on the legs.

The artefacts were housed in a series of glass fronted cabinets, with information boards nearby that gave a brief explanation of each one. There was a party of school kids slightly ahead, which Adrian estimated to be aged about eleven or twelve. They were being taken around by their teachers, and despite strenuous efforts to control their exuberance, the pupils’ whoops and loud chatter dominated Adrian and Rachel’s immediate vicinity.

“What on earth is this?” she asked. “It’s very striking. All the information card says is that it’s a piece of the stern from the *Royal Charles*.”

“Striking is a good word,” he replied. “Charles II went to war against the Dutch between 1665-1667. It was a long-term plan he had started to concoct before he came to the throne to try and dominate Europe, which was the politically and militarily prominent part of the world at the time. England’s navy had a reputation for being the best, and Charles developed it further. It was to be a sea war in which England fought the Dutch, and he was confident of winning. Holland was England’s main maritime rival at the time. Sadly, Charles ran out of money after about eighteen months, and couldn’t put his fleet out. So, the Dutch took advantage of that, and launched an attack into the river Medway estuary, which leads into the Thames. London was under direct threat, but the Dutch only went as far as the naval base at Chatham. They sunk or burned about 19 ships, including all of the big ones. This is the part of the stern, or rear, of the *Royal Charles*, which was the flag ship. It was a massive one too. The Dutch towed it away and eventually destroyed it, but kept this part of it. It was an incredibly humiliating event for Charles II, and for the country. It’s been on display in a museum in Amsterdam since then. It seems that it’s been leant to this institution for the exhibition.”

“Wow, that’s fascinating,” replied Rachel. “It’s a shame they don’t say all of this on one of the little cards. It just looks like a dull hunk of wood, but its background is very interesting.”

“Yes, I know. And can you believe that this attack was so unexpected that the English didn’t put up a fight to try and keep the vessel. There were only a couple of sailors on it as watchkeepers. That meant that the Dutch were able to approach it in a rowing boat and take it with as little as about nine seamen. Actually, the Chatham raid was the worst defeat in English naval history, according to my school History teacher. And of course, the irony is that England’s navy at the time was meant to be the best, and yet it suffered such a thrashing.”

“What happened to Charles?” she asked. “I suppose as he was King, he didn’t have a problem. Despite the outcome of the war, his position was secure.”

“I know what you mean. The problem was, though, that when he initially came back to England after having spent several years as an exile during the Commonwealth and Oliver Cromwell’s rule, his throne was very insecure. That was five years before the war. You see, the English had got used to being without a king, and Charles didn’t have an army to enforce his rule. So, he relied on Parliament to keep him in power, and it was very unhappy at him for losing the war, and all of the money he had wasted on it. Even worse, the people deeply resented the suffering they’d endured during the conflict. They were heavily taxed to fund everything, yet it had been to no avail. Charles was actually really scared of losing his crown, and grovelled to the MPs to support him.”

“Why didn’t he have an army?” asked Rachel again. “I can’t imagine a king being without one.”

“Yes, it does seem really strange. I thought that too when my teacher mentioned it. I didn’t understand, so asked him about it. I mean, doesn’t every country have an army? It seems that the army had kept Cromwell and his cronies in power by suppressing everybody else. You know, going into people’s homes and forcing them to pay loads of money in taxes to pay the soldiers’ wages. And they weren’t even allowed to enjoy themselves as the soldiers stopped that too because a lot of them were puritans, and didn’t like to see dancing and singing, except hymns in church.”

“Sounds really boring to me.”

“I agree. I wouldn’t have wanted to live back then. Anyway, when Charles came back to England as King in 1660, the same army was still there, and still had its strong anti-royal sentiment. Also, their on-going wages were more than the country could afford. So, Charles had to disband the army very quickly to protect himself from them as well as to reduce his costs. Strange, isn’t it? You can’t imagine that happening nowadays. So, that’s why he didn’t have an army to protect him and keep him in power after the war.”

“I was never interested in history when I was at school,” said Rachel. “It all seemed so irrelevant and dull. But now that you’ve told me all of that, I wish I’d paid more attention in class.”

During the time that Adrian had explained all of this to Rachel, the school kids had moved on, and the hall was much quieter. They went into the next chamber, which Adrian thought looked identical to the previous one, apart from the layout of the display cabinets and, presumably, their contents. There were a few other people in the area, some sitting on the benches and whispering to each other as if they feared they might be evicted if they spoke too loudly. A small number of others were peering at a few of the items that were behind the protective glass frontages.

Rachel’s attention was caught by something in the stand next to her. “This just looks like an old piece of paper, but the card next to it says it carried an important message that helped bring about the Restoration. What on earth does all that mean?”

“Do you see the date. 13th May 1660. The Restoration which was the restoring of the King to his throne happened on the 25th. Well, at least that’s when he landed in England for the first time after 14 years of being an outcast on the continent. He didn’t enter London till the 29th, which was his 30th birthday. The paper is a letter from General George Monck, who was head of all of the armed forces at the time, and had been the

Commonwealth's commander in Scotland for several years before that. Weirdly, he had been a secret, staunch Royalist. I think a large part of that was due to his wife, actually, but also because he came from a deeply monarchist family. The letter's to Admiral Edward Montagu, who was Monck's subordinate, and it seems to tactfully suggest that Montagu takes his huge fleet across to Holland where Charles was waiting at the time. Remember, the war was a long way off at that point. The Dutch were friendly to the King, and were keen to get on his good side so that they could be on good terms with him when he became head of the English state. In fact, Monck's note was an order, but I've always liked the phrase he used. Can you see? It says that he wanted Montagu to go over to Holland and 'waft' the King back. I don't think it's a word we would use nowadays."

"You said that Montagu took over a large fleet. Surely, he could have brought the King back with one ship?" asked Rachel.

"Yes, I found that really interesting too when my teacher told us. Although the countries were friendly towards each other, the Dutch were still England's main rival, and my teacher said that the English sent over so many ships to impress them. You know, sort of, our new King's got a powerful navy, so don't mess with him. That kind of thing."

"You can't imagine that going on all those years ago. All we learned about was Queen Victoria and the British empire, and Henry VIII and his six wives."

They wandered through to the next gallery, and Adrian heard Rachel give another gasp. She was standing in front of another display case. "What on earth is that? It's amazing. It says that it belonged to 'Lady Castlemaine.' Who was she?"

Adrian looked at the glittering necklace. He estimated its length to be about three feet, and it was clearly designed to be wrapped several times around the wearer's neck. It was made of gold, diamonds and sapphires intermingling with rubies. The colours were exquisite, and even after three hundred and seventy years, the light still glinted off the jewels. It truly was magnificent.

"Her name was Barbara Palmer, and she was the King's main mistress for about the first seven years of his reign," replied Adrian. "The Countess of Castlemaine was her title.

"She must have been incredibly rich to afford a necklace like that."

"My teacher told me that Charles had several mistresses throughout his reign, and together they gave him at least fourteen illegitimate children. He used to shower jewels and other wealth onto them when he was with them. Apparently, according to Samuel Pepys, he gave Lady Castlemaine

so much that at a particular ball the jewellery she wore was worth more than that of the queen and the heir to the throne's wife put together."

"Who was Samuel Pepys? Was he one of the courtiers?" asked Rachel.

"No," answered Adrian. "Actually, he worked for the King as a clerk in the navy. But he was very ambitious and made it his business to know everything that happened at court. He kept a diary during the 1660s which my teacher said provides very important information to us nowadays. He read some of it out to us, and it was quite saucy. In one passage Pepys describes having had sex with a mistress, even though he was also married at the time. I think his wife was about fifteen years younger than him, and was in her mid-teens when they tied the knot."

Rachel laughed. "I hope you haven't taken inspiration from Pepys's example of playing away from home. You're very good looking, and I'm having great trouble keeping my hands off you, but I wouldn't like to share you."

"Do you really feel like that?" he asked. "It sounds like you're becoming even more serious about this relationship, just like me."

Rachel pulled Adrian down onto one of the benches in the middle of the room, and he noticed that she had gone a little red in the face. "My feelings are growing fast, even more than when we went out for our walk round the lake. I'm so glad you feel the same. It's all new to me. I've never felt like this about any of my previous boyfriends. Just don't go wandering off with other females, like Charles II. That's all I ask. Can you live with that?"

Adrian smiled. "Definitely. My heart seems to have started to sprint along an emotional racetrack, but I don't know where the finish line is. Perhaps we can cross the tape together."

They sat and cuddled each other until an attendant came up to them. "Sorry, you two, but we're closing for lunch now. You can wait in the café if you like, and come back in again when we reopen."

They both looked up and started to laugh. "Yes," answered Rachel. "I think that would be a good idea. Thanks. I'm a little peckish now, anyway."

Chapter 21.

As Adrian sat at the table in the museum's café, waiting for Rachel to return with the food, he glanced around. It seemed like any of the ones he had visited in any number of other institutions. The walls were painted white, the tables were crammed together to maximise the number of customers that could be accommodated and there was a heated glass cabinet that had some pasties and other hot snacks inside it, with a drinks machine alongside. Cakes were perched on the stands immediately before the till.

The most prominent feature, though, was the large bank of glass windows which went from a wall about three feet in height above the ground, all the way to the ceiling. They certainly emitted a lot of light, he reflected. However, the view through them to the outside was remarkable. In the foreground was a fountain that sprayed water over a series of little figures, each of which clearly represented one of the seven dwarfs out of a fairy story. A nearby notice announced the artist's name, and that the inspiration for the installation had come from his visit to a theme park that heavily featured this well-known tale.

"They look quite remarkable, don't they?"

Adrian looked up to see a female with long brown hair, deep brown eyes and an aquiline nose. He stared at her for a moment. She seemed vaguely familiar, but his mind was struggling to place her. "You don't remember me, do you?" she said. "I was in school with you. I'm Susan."

Adrian smiled and shook the hand that was proffered. "Oh, yes," he replied. "Of course. You were friends with Selina, and you used to sit next to me in our history classes. Selina didn't do history, did she?"

"No, but you and I used to have such fun. Do you remember the quizzes the teacher used to set us every so often? We were supposed to answer the questions on our own, but we always cheated and joined forces. We inevitably got high marks."

"And then there were the field trips to see exhibitions in London," said Adrian. "Those weekends in the hotel were glorious."

"Yes, and to this day I still don't know how you managed to sneak into my room every time. We were quite young, but I still found you terribly handsome. Nothing's changed there either. Do you remember I used to try and get you to change your silly hair style?"

Adrian laughed. "I do, but my mother wouldn't let me. Given how we got together on those trips, I never understood why we didn't go out properly when we got back to school."

“I found you very attractive, and was very keen on you, but you were rather the butt of the other girls’ jokes because of your hair. I was too young to fight that at the time, but I certainly would if that kind of thing were to happen now.”

Adrian briefly thought back to his time at school. Mostly it was full of misery, but the trips away became like beacons of happiness. And he had certainly been keen on Susan. And she was even more pretty now than he could have imagined.

“I’m sorry, but I’m here with my girlfriend. I’ve really enjoyed reminiscing about our childhood romances, but I don’t think she’d appreciate them. I think we’d better change the subject, if you don’t mind.”

Susan sat down. “Okay. Fair enough. I’d hate to get you in trouble, but if you change your mind, give me a ring. My number’s easy to remember. It’s 733233.”

“Thanks,” he said. “Are you here to see the exhibition on the Restoration too?”

“Well, sort of. Do you like it?”

“It’s marvellous,” he answered. “I’ve been interested in Charles II ever since our History teacher introduced us to him. I haven’t seen you for ages. I bumped into Selina yesterday at a concert and she told me about her studies at a conservatoire. What have you been up to?”

“I did history at university. I was lucky to get this job immediately after finishing my doctorate. I set this exhibition up. The person who was supposed to do it had to have some time off due to sudden ill-health, so the museum’s director asked me to do it. I’m not sure that he was very enthusiastic about it, but there wasn’t anyone else. What about you?”

“Oh, pretty boring, really. After graduating, I trained as an accountant at a firm in town, but I’ve got some time off at the moment. I’m with Rachel, who’s a nurse. Actually, I’ve just met her, and she has a few days off too as she’s between shifts, so we’re trying to make the most of the time. Have you seen Selina recently?”

Susan laughed. “You might say that. I live with her. Well, we share a flat, although she’s usually away on tour, so she’s hardly ever around.”

Rachel announced her arrival through the loud clanking of the tea cups as she put the tray covered with drinks and food onto the table. “Aren’t you going to introduce me?” she asked as she sat next to Adrian.

Susan reached over and they shook hands. “I’m Susan. Adrian and I were at school together. I work here and came out to get something from the café for lunch, and noticed him.” She looked at Adrian. “It must be, what, about ten years since we last saw each other?”

“Yes, about that. Perhaps a bit more,” he answered. He looked at Rachel. “Susan put the exhibition on Charles II together.”

Rachel smiled, although Adrian thought it looked rather forced. “Congratulations,” she said. “You’ve managed to get a lot of very interesting pieces together. Adrian’s been telling me about them. I didn’t realise Charles II was so fascinating.”

“I know. I loved studying him at university,” answered Susan, and looked at her watch. “I was particularly interested in how the navy was the most important arm of state in creating the conditions for the Restoration to take place. Most people thought it was the army that did that, but I’ve shown that that was impossible.”

“That must have been very satisfying,” responded Rachel.

Susan smiled. “It was, actually. Look, I’m sorry, but I’ve got to get back to work.” She glanced at Adrian. “Give me a ring sometime and we can have a proper catch-up.” She rose from the table. “It’s been nice meeting you again, and I hope you both enjoy the rest of the artefacts.”

As Susan walked off, Rachel crunched on her pasty. She was quiet as she chewed the food, and after a few moments of awkward silence, Adrian asked, “are you annoyed at me for something?”

“I didn’t realise you were so popular with the girls at your school. That’s the second one whose come up to you in the last three days. First Selina, and now Susan today.”

“I wasn’t popular. I was rather neglected, actually. Do you remember that I didn’t have a fashionable hairstyle? To be honest, I’m surprised that either of them remembered me.”

Neither of them spoke, and Adrian noticed that Rachel avoided looking at him throughout their lunch. Eventually, she looked up. “I don’t want to go back into the exhibition this afternoon. I’m getting quite concerned about Hannah, and I’d like to check on her, so I’ll go straight round there. Hopefully she’ll be free. I’ll meet you back at the flat later.”

“Okay, if that’s what you want. I hope she’s in.”

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Adrian's eyes wandered around the lounge in Rachel's flat as he waited for Shaun to answer the call, but his mind was occupied with other thoughts. He pondered his relationship with Rachel, and the things they'd done together since he'd met her at the hospital. Of course, there had been the frequent rugby melees in bed in which she had usually taken the initiative. Yet, on other occasions she had been incredibly kind, and he wasn't sure how he would have coped without the care she had given him. With a start he realised that he had fallen in love with her. She was so full of energy, and he found her desire to live for the moment to be utterly bewitching.

The best part was that she'd mentioned that she was also experiencing strong feelings for him. It was all so quick, but it still felt right, and he started to become anxious at the thought that the chance meetings with Selina and Susan might have damaged their budding relationship. He'd hardly known them at school, and they had certainly both developed into beautiful women.

His attention was brought back to the lounge by the ringing sound emitted by his phone's earpiece. "Come on," he whispered. After a few seconds, the voicemail interrupted again with the usual instruction to leave a message at the sound of the tone.

"Shaun, I've tried a couple of times and I'm getting quite worried. Please could you ring to let me know how you are? And, of course, it goes without saying that I want you to ask if there's anything I can do to help."

He terminated the call and looked at the clock. It was late and there was no sign of Rachel. He had expected her to return two hours ago, in time to share the meal he'd produced. To try and make amends for the upset he suspected she felt, he'd prepared her favourite, but it would be cold and inedible by now. Maybe Hannah had been in a bad state, and Rachel had needed to stay longer than expected in order to support her friend.

He picked his phone up from the nearby coffee table, and dialled her number. After a couple of rings, Rachel answered. "Are you okay?" he asked.

"Yes, but Hannah isn't. Dominic hit her this afternoon, just before I arrived, and then went out to the pub. She's in pain. She says that these days, when he gets back, he's usually drunk and lays into her again. She's terrified, so we're gathering some of her things, and I'm going to bring her round to my flat for tonight. We haven't eaten yet, so we'll stop at a restaurant to get something. We'll be quite late, so don't wait up. I'll see you in the morning." She disconnected the call immediately.

His mind went into overdrive. The days they'd had together had been wonderful. The empty flat had allowed them to wallow in each other's company without any interruption, jointly indulging themselves in bed

whenever the mood took them. It had felt like their cocoon could go on forever. He'd managed to forget that Phoebe would be returning in just over two weeks from her honeymoon and that this special period could end at that point if Dan and her decided to live there.

And now they might have to share the apartment with Hannah almost immediately and for an undefined period. Certainly, Rachel's friend couldn't return to her marital home if she ran the risk of being hurt by her husband. Yet, that would mark the end of their time alone. He was finally managing to find some peace after Lucy's dreadful murder, but the devoted support that Rachel had given him could end. She would have another soul to which her compassion might be directed, and he was going to have to share her.

The tears started to stream down his face again. Would the misery never end? His mind started to replay the scene outside the barn when Lucy died. He relived the terrible screams, and how he had rushed out to see his beloved lying there, surrounded by her blood. Would he never be able to forget the words she whispered about wanting to spend the rest of their lives together before the light left her eyes?

He shook his head. At least this time he hadn't felt the need to gain some distraction and comfort from the memories by rocking back and forth. Rachel's loving kindness had managed to put a halt to that, but he suddenly realised how much he had come to rely on her in the few days they'd been together. Of course, it was important to provide support to friends in their hour of need. He fully appreciated that. And Hannah's circumstances were terrible. No-one should have to endure such treatment from their partner, whether they were male or female. Yet, his whole body yearned for her; to fall asleep in her arms at night; to be soothed by her gentle breathing.

Maybe it would be best to go to bed now, even though he would be on his own. He yawned, rose and wandered through to Rachel's room. He was so completely fatigued that as soon as his head hit the pillow he fell into a deep sleep. That meant that he didn't hear Rachel and Hannah come in about two hours later.

"Shhh," said Rachel. "He's out for the count in my bed. He sleeps so soundly that if we're quiet enough, we won't wake him."

"I'd stand a better chance of keeping quiet if you hadn't insisted that we had all that alcohol. I feel quite squiffy, and you don't look any different. You really do live for the moment, don't you?"

"Well, why not. We might as well enjoy ourselves, despite the situation!"

Hannah laughed, and briefly glanced at Adrian through his bedroom door, which he had left open. "We can't move him now. He looks too cosy.

Shall I take the settee in the lounge and then you can have the spare bed in Phoebe's room?"

"No, I can't imagine you'll be very comfortable on that. The bed in Phoebe's room is a double, so we might as well share it. You are my best friend, after all, and we've needed to do that on other occasions. Do you remember that summer camp when we thought those dreadful boys might catch us?"

"Yes. You came in with me in my room, just in case. What fun we had back then."

They both laughed. "We still can," responded Rachel.

Chapter 22.

As Adrian drifted towards consciousness after having spent the night in a deep but very restless sleep, he briefly became aware of whispering voices coming from somewhere nearby. He turned his head in the expectation of finding Rachel lying there, but her side of the bed was empty and it was clear that as there was no indentation in the pillow, she had spent the dark hours somewhere else.

He frowned. He hoped that nothing untoward had happened. It was possible that Dominic had returned before the two girls could leave, and a fracas had ensued. Thoughts of the violent end that Lucy had met flooded into his mind again, and he started to quietly whimper. Surely that kind of thing couldn't happen again so quickly to a person he loved? Could it? That truly would be a cruel trick of fate. And yet, he'd heard some voices. It couldn't be Phoebe. She wasn't due back from her honeymoon for two weeks.

He shook his head. Maybe he should check with the hospital to see if Rachel and Hannah had been admitted. If they hadn't, it would eliminate the worst scenario and he could focus on something else. Just as he was reaching over to the bedside table for his phone, the whispering started again.

"Are you sure it's safe to do this? What if Adrian found out?"

Even though the sounds were so quiet, Adrian easily recognised Rachel's voice. "If Adrian knew what we were doing, I think it would deeply upset him. I think he's fallen for me, and I must admit I was starting to feel the same, but I don't like to share my partners with anyone. He has a lot of other females interested in him. We met two of them in the last few days. How could I trust anyone in that kind of situation! He'd have too many temptations."

"Well, he is very good looking, but it doesn't mean that he'd be unfaithful, though," answered the other person. "It's not his fault that other women are attracted to him? And I think you said that he's extremely vulnerable just now, and I'm not surprised, after the way he lost his last girlfriend."

"True, and I still have very strong feelings for him," mumbled Rachel. "But this seems too good an opportunity to miss. Why shouldn't we have some fun?"

"Are you sure?"

"Oh, don't worry. Anyway, he'll still be asleep and will never know."

Adrian heard a low groan and then it went silent. He quietly got out of bed and tip toed into the corridor, and peered through a small gap in the entrance to the spare bedroom. He caught his breath at what he saw. Rachel and Hannah's bodies were tightly entwined underneath their duvet, and they were engaged in a deep and passionate kiss. He gave a howl, ran back to where he'd come from and slammed the door. He sat down, and felt the tears start to cascade down his cheeks.

Disjointed words came flowing towards him, but his brain seemed unable to focus on them clearly. Then he took a deep breath, and came to a decision. He knew he loved Rachel, but he also realised now that she wasn't the person that he thought she was. He held a firm belief that it was important to be faithful to a partner, whereas in reality she obviously held a different view.

A loud noise came towards him, which he slowly registered as being a banging sound. "I'd like to come in and explain, but I won't if you don't want me to," said Rachel.

"No, please don't. I'd just like to be left alone."

A phone rang in the room next door, and Adrian caught Rachel's answer. "Yes?" There was a brief hiatus, and then, "oh, shit! We'll be there as soon as we can."

Rachel's footsteps disappeared for a moment, a muffled conversation came through the wall, then he heard Rachel's voice again. "Adrian," she said. "Hannah and I have to go out right away. It seems that Dominic got into a fight at the pub last night and knifed someone. He's been arrested and the police have asked Hannah to go to the station. They want to ask her some questions. I need to go with her to give her support, but please don't worry. I'll be back as soon as possible. Please wait here for me, and we can straighten everything out."

The front door slammed, and Adrian knew that he couldn't bear the silence that would envelope him if he stayed in the flat. Anyway, there was no denying what he'd witnessed between Rachel and Hannah. She had previously stated that she had no wish to share him with another female, and yet he'd discovered her being unfaithful in the next room. She hadn't even been discreet in having her affair. Whilst he'd initially found her trait of living for the moment to be attractive, now it only appeared to offer negative connotations.

He knew he needed to leave before Rachel returned, but where would he go? He was fully aware that he was in too much emotional turmoil to survive for long on his own. The solitude would cripple him. Visions of the farewell note that Jemima had left and the subsequent miserable time he'd endured would haunt him, but that would pale into insignificance compared to the dreams he would have concerning Lucy, and her awful

fate. Rachel's devoted attention had temporarily banished them, but that could never work again due to the sight of seeing Rachel and Hannah together.

As if in a trance, he collected his belongings, including the coffee machine from the kitchen, left the apartment and took the lift to the garage. On walking through the sliding doors, he looked around and staggered over towards his car, and put his gear into the boot. The nearby light bulb wasn't working, so in the semi-darkness the sleek machine looked like a crouched panther, and he gave a slight whimper as he imagined it coming to life and pouncing on him. Maybe that was an allegory for the way he felt that fate had treated him. Every time he seemed to have a future, something else came along and squashed him.

He settled himself into the driver's seat and started the engine. There was the usual muffled growl as the machinery was woken up to perform its duty, and then it settled down to the normal purring, as if it was enjoying the pleasure of its owner returning. He drove the car over to the mechanical doors, got out, pressed the little green button by the exit and heard the metal gates swing open as he returned to his vehicle. He put the machine into gear and entered the road.

He had no idea where he was heading. It was if his surroundings had become a fantasy world, shimmering as he slid along street after street. He drove passed a shopping area where some people were walking along the pavements as if their lives depended on them reaching their destination promptly. Others were looking in the various establishments' windows, admiring the displays that were designed to get them to part with their money.

He turned into a long road and gently pressed the accelerator to reach a slow and measured pace. The stream of traffic moved in a steady line, public lights tottered by, cyclists weaving in and out of the motors, and pedestrians running through gaps in the bonnets and bumpers as if the hunks of metal that could wipe them from the face of the Earth didn't exist.

Eventually, his blank gaze vaguely registered that he had reached the business district, the high office blocks reaching into the heavens. He thought he recognised his location, and turned down a side road and parked in an empty space as if some invisible being had taken control of him. He got a ticket from the parking meter and placed it on the front dashboard, and then entered the nearby coffee shop.

He was awoken from his trance by the voice. "Hello again, sir. We haven't seen you for a while. Would you like the usual?" Adrian looked up to see the chap behind the counter smiling, and waiting expectantly for an answer.

He tried to smile. “Hi Frankie. Yes, please. The usual.”

As the attendant worked on the machine which swiftly started to gurgle away, he asked, “have you been on holiday?”

“No, I’ve had some personal issues, and needed some time off to deal with them.” Adrian looked around the place. “It’s quite quiet at the moment. I’ll be able to have my usual seat by the window.”

He paid for his drink, picked it up and wandered over to the chair and slumped into it. He blankly looked through the glass. A couple of businessmen were animatedly discussing some inaudible issue, hands gesticulating increasingly wildly as if they imagined that this might clinch the argument. A man and woman who were both dressed in suits were stood close to each other in a manner that suggested that they were more than just colleagues. A guy got out of his parked car, accidentally dropping his brief case which flew open and the enclosed papers escaped away on the breeze to attempt an independent existence.

The voice returned his attention to what some people call ‘the real world’, and he looked round to see a lady that he vaguely recognised. She had long, frizzy blond hair, startling green eyes and a round, button nose, and he vaguely registered her as being particularly pretty. The delicate gold chain around her slender neck displayed a sophisticated style which her expensive-looking clothes of slim blue bodice and similarly shaded trousers did their best to enhance.

“You don’t remember me, do you?” she said. “I’m Elise. You helped me with a nasty tax problem some time ago.”

“Oh, yes, sorry. How are you?”

“Do you mind if I sit with you? You look awful. Are you alright?”

He looked at her for a moment. He wanted to be alone so that he could try and recover some semblance of sanity and attempt to work out what he could do now. Instead, he switched to his normal professional politeness.

“I’ve had better days. I’ve had some time off,” he eventually answered.

“I know. I’ve just had a meeting at your offices. I was hoping to benefit from your advice again, but when I rang up to make the appointment with you, the secretary said you were away for an indefinite period. Is there anything I can do?”

It took a moment for her words to sink in, but he quickly found that the presence of someone who expressed an interest in his wellbeing made him feel less isolated. It was as if a pin had pierced a balloon and his

troubles flowed out. He mentioned the time he'd been given off work due to the torment he'd endured on finding out that Jemima had been unfaithful, the trauma surrounding Lucy's murder and the detachment from reality at finding Rachel having one of her rugby scrummages, this time with her best friend.

"You really have had it rough. What plans do you have?"

"I don't have any. I can barely register anything that's happening right now. It all seems so unreal."

"I can understand that. When we last met, you told me that you have your own flat, but I really don't think you should be on your own just now."

She paused and looked out of the window for a few moments. Adrian took his first sip of his coffee and screwed up his face as it was nearly cold. Elise laughed. "That's better. I've had an idea. Why don't you come and stay with me for a few days? I keep an apartment not far from here for business purposes and it has a spare bedroom. That might give you a little time to get yourself together."

"No, I couldn't. Lucy and Rachel let me stay with them, but it turned out badly. Lucy's past romantic life caught up with her and ended our future together. And Rachel rekindled the intimacy with her best friend, and it ended our relationship. Something like that's bound to happen again."

"Hmmm. I see what you mean. There is one difference, though. I haven't ever had time for romances of any seriousness, and have never been lucky enough to have a close friend. I'm always on the move with my business and that has prevented it, so I don't come with any of that kind of baggage. So, do you think that'll change your mind? I really don't think you should be alone right now. You seem too vulnerable."

As Adrian looked at Elise, he felt a warmth overwhelm him. He realised that she was right. He'd never be able to survive on his own in his empty flat. There would still be reminders of Jemima dotted around, and the silence would allow the torture of his mind, resulting from the mire of memories of his time with Lucy that he knew would haunt him. In that scenario, the next place he'd stay would be a hospital dedicated to long term patients who craved medical attention for their mental health issues.

He weakly smiled. "Yes, thank you, I'd like that."

"Come on then. Let's go. Even though it's still mid-morning, you look like you could do with a long sleep. You're not going to get that here."

“I’ve got my car over there. I’ll need to take it to the garage under my apartment building first.”

“That’s really not a problem. I can follow you and then take you back to my place. Will you need to get anything from your flat?”

“No, it’s all in the boot.”

Elise reached over and put her hand on his arm. “Don’t worry. I’ll look after you. And one thing’s certain. The world will look much better after a long sleep. Then we can discuss what you want to do with yourself.”

Chapter 23.

Adrian opened his eyes and moved his head on the pillow expecting to see Rachel lying there, but the space was empty. He screwed his eyes up and then reopened them, but he was still on his own. Then he remembered. *How many of these chapters was he going to have to endure?* First Jemima leaving his life, then Lucy, followed by Rachel; the relationships all ending in such dramatic ways, and over such a short time period. Was he cursed never to have the kind of normal romances that his friends experienced!

He reached over to the side table and retrieved his phone to find out what the time was. He gasped. It was mid-afternoon. He'd been out for five hours. He noticed that Rachel had rung when the machine had been on mute as he slept, and left a message. He engaged the voicemail. "Adrian. I'm sorry I had to rush off. Hannah's been in such a state, and I couldn't let her go to the police station on her own. It seems Dominic is going to be charged and held in police cells pending his appearance in court. As Hannah can safely go home for now, you and I won't be interrupted again. I had hoped you'd wait for me, but the flat was empty when I got back. I don't know where you are, but please ring me and I'll come to collect you. I'm sorry for what happened, and I realise that I love you and that I would like to continue our relationship. Hopefully speak soon, sweetheart." The tone that indicated the end of the message sounded, and Adrian pressed delete and blocked the number.

He looked around the room. It clearly displayed his host's wealth. All of the three internal walls were white, one of which had a built-in cupboard with light but solid wooden fronts and gold handles. The other two displayed pictures that were evidently of great value. One was an extremely vibrant still life full of bright reds, yellows and greens containing depictions of peaches and prunes. The title on the frame said that it had been named *Peches et Prune* by Pierre-Auguste Renoir. Another one was more monotone and featured a shepherdess with her dog, staff and a small flock of sheep entitled *Paysage* and was by Camille Pissarro. The leaves and branches of the tree which occupied the central position seemed to reach out desperately as if the plant was afraid of being left alone and was trying to catch the grouping to retain them for a little longer. A third showed Samuel Peploe's *Quayside at Cassis* which delicately portrayed a café scene with three customers lounging under an awning, the nearby quayside awaiting the arrival of a fishing boat.

The fourth side of the room consisted entirely of glass, the centre of which were a couple of doors that exited onto a balcony. The deeply rich curtains of a gold and black design were closed, but slim rays managed to intrude into the interior darkness, illuminating the luxuriant red carpet. It looked so thick that Adrian flippantly wondered how far up his legs the pile might reach.

It was very different from the chamber in which he awoke for the first time in Rachel's apartment, he dolefully reflected, and was grateful that the tears that these thoughts triggered were interrupted by Elise. "Ah, so you're awake. I've been popping in every so often to check on you."

She came over to the bed, stripped off, and once she'd climbed in beside him, she removed the few clothes he was wearing too. "I've been wanting to do this with you since I first met you all those months ago."

Before he could say anything, he found himself aroused by her expert hands and the climax that followed inside her was brief but explosive. "Thank you. Now that I know what you're like, I look forward to draining you down again," she said.

"Wow, I've never known anyone so efficient before."

"I try to be like that in everything I do," she replied. "I usually find that having sex with someone soon after meeting them helps to enhance the relationship much more quickly than going on a series of tedious dates."

"Do you mean that you treat physical intimacy as a transaction?"

"Sometimes. Depending on the person, it can also ease the wheels of my business, but there's certainly no emotion involved as far as I'm concerned in those cases, and it only happens once. But I don't feel like that with you. I liked you from the first moment I met you that time in your firm's offices, and thought we could get very close, so was very disappointed when you told me you already had a partner. And, of course, you're so good looking that I wanted to get you into bed immediately. I hope this will be the start of many bouts with you."

Adrian was silent for a few moments. In addition to losing Lucy through horrendous circumstances, he'd already suffered the infidelity of a partner twice. He gulped, and leaned up on one elbow so that he could look at Elise more easily. "Look, I am very grateful to you for bringing me back here, but I believe that people should be faithful to their partners. I couldn't cope with sharing you with a multitude of your business contacts."

Elise smiled and leaned up to kiss him. "Don't worry. Although I haven't had a long-term relationship before, I've always been loyal to anyone I've been properly attached to, even though they've all been for short periods. I won't be unfaithful to you, including with professional associates."

Adrian slumped back down onto the pillow and closed his eyes. She was right. He felt more relaxed in her company now, and he definitely wasn't worried about any professional conflict of interest. Her refreshing honesty had seen to that. Maybe her kind of frank care was the sort of

support he needed, after all. And, anyway, he knew that he wouldn't survive on his own.

He sighed. There was no question that he had found her charming when he had first met her, and her generous offer to let him stay with her had started to unlock his heart a little. Perhaps it would be a good idea to resist his initial impulse to leave immediately. It might allow him to see whether the relationship had the potential that he instinctively felt it could.

"I tell you what," he said. "To celebrate our new relationship, I'll make you a cuppa. I brought my coffee machine along with the rest of my gear from my car when we dropped it off."

"I was going to choose one of my bottles of champagne for that purpose tonight before we go out for a meal."

He smiled. "You can still do that, but see what you think of my coffee first."

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Adrian sat opposite Elise at her kitchen table, watched her sip the coffee and her eyes start to glaze over as she mentally disappeared to her own individual version of paradise. As he waited for her to complete her journey and return to reality, he looked around the room. The walls above the counters where all the meals were prepared were covered in cupboards that were constructed by similar light wooden units to those in the bedroom, but it was the worksurfaces that dominated everything. They were green marble, with white and red streaks running through them. The expansive cooking range sat next to the large sink; well, more of a tub which he could imagine people in previous times might have used to wash their clothes in. And the fridge/freezer was enormous.

He was next to another large window that allowed the sun to infuse the room with its golden rays, with doors next to it exiting onto another balcony. There were some stainless steel railings around the perimeter of the outside space, and a couple of pot plants, one at each corner. There was a dark wooden table and a couple of chairs in the middle, next to the balustrade, and it was clear that the south west facing angle of the property would provide any occupants with a good opportunity to top up their tan. He smiled. Well, should the local climate permit it, he thought.

"That was amazing," said Elise, returning Adrian's thoughts to the kitchen. "Perhaps I should always celebrate new business relationships with some of this, rather than champagne."

"Would it seal a deal more firmly than having sex with the person instead?" asked Adrian, sarcastically.

Elise laughed. “That’s better. Your sense of humour is returning. My diary is usually quite busy, but I expected my meeting at your firm this morning to be much longer than it was, so I left the rest of the day free. Now I’m very pleased that I did. I can spend it with you. I’d still like to go to the restaurant I mentioned, but is there anything you’d like to do before that?”

Their conversation was interrupted by a loud banging on the front door. Elise rolled her eyes. “I can’t seem to escape business. It inevitably finds me, even if I’ve got time off. Could you wait here while I get rid of whoever it is? We can continue our chat afterwards.”

Adrian watched her disappear through the door, into the hall and turn the locks. “Not you again,” he heard Elise say.

An aggressive male voice said, “at last, you’re in. I’ve tried ringing you but you never answer. When are you going to pay me?”

“I’ve already told you. When you’ve finished the work to my satisfaction, and not before. That was what we agreed in the contract, if you remember.”

“You know perfectly well that it’s all finished, and the surveyor has certified it.”

“He wasn’t the approved surveyor, as stipulated in our agreement,” replied Elise. “You’ll need to wait till it’s all been signed off properly.”

“I can’t wait for him to return from holiday in three weeks. I need the money now, so the substitute will need to do. You know that I don’t have the cash to take you to court over this, but I’m desperate. I need that money immediately so that I can repay that huge loan I’ve taken out to fund the work. The interest payments alone are crippling me.”

“Your financial worries are no concern of mine. You should have thought of that before you signed the contract. You’ll be paid when everything’s been properly approved.”

“That’s not good enough,” said the chap. “If you don’t pay me now, I’ll take some things from your apartment to compensate, and I know you’ve got some very valuable items in there.”

At this, Adrian wandered out of the kitchen, into the hall and stood next to Elise. “You’re disturbing my afternoon,” and heard gasps from Elise and a crunching sound as he swung his fist into the man’s stomach. The chap bent over, gasping to breathe, and squealed in pain as Adrian’s uppercut sent his head sharply backwards, hitting the wall before he slowly slid downwards. “The next time,” he said, “try and use a more

formal channel to conduct your business through, rather than harassing someone on their doorstep," before firmly closing the door.

"You look a little shaken. Let's go back to the kitchen and I'll get you some more coffee," he said.

Once the machine finished gurgling the new batch through its magical insides, he poured her a cup of the steaming liquid, and, with shaking hands, she took a gulp. He sat and watched as she repeated her journey to an unknown destination, and eventually return to smile at him. "Thank you. I needed that."

"Do you get many business partners like that?" he asked.

"A few." she said, her thumb waving towards the door. "They're pleased to get the business and happy to sign the contract. But they don't do their sums properly, and then want me to compensate by paying them early. Just like in this case, I need to make sure that the work is done properly, so I have to have the approved professional certify things, or I could be left with a huge bill to correct any issues. The chap who came to the door a moment ago used one of his mates who is a builder, and expected me to accept that."

Adrian smiled. "Well, if you did have to do lots of corrective work, at least it would be tax deductible."

"Don't joke about something like that. I got caught out once, when I had just started out. I felt sorry for the other person, and paid up when he demanded it. It wasn't long till I found out the extent of the problems that had been left. The bill was huge and almost bankrupted me. I've never made that mistake again."

"When I advised you, I noticed you'd taken out limited liability," said Adrian. "Did you do that after that initial problem?"

"Yes. They say it's important to learn from these situations, and that was definitely an expensive one. I wanted the protection that that kind of legal structure provides."

"Have you ever had someone get so aggressive before?"

"Yes, but I've always been able to talk my way out. I really don't know what I'd have done if you hadn't been here." She came round the table, bent over and after she'd kissed him, she whispered, "thank you. Come on, let's go."

Adrian looked at his watch. "Yes, I guess we could go out to the restaurant now. I'm a little peckish."

She reached down with one of her hands, and he felt an instant and overwhelming reaction. “You’ve had long enough to rest. I want you back in the bedroom. If you’re hungry, don’t worry, it won’t take long. We’ll go out afterwards.”

Chapter 24.

The next morning Adrian looked around Elise's lounge as he waited for his call to Shaun to be answered. Her taste and wealth were yet again on full display. The large and extremely comfy settee he reclined on was of an expensive black leather, with a solid, dark wooden coffee table in front, and two deep arm chairs nearby. A central feature was the large mock fire with fake flames which exuded a delicious warmth, and a massive, dark framed television next to it. There was no window to let in the morning light, but the double glass doors allowed access to the balcony that was shared with the kitchen.

A nearby shelf held various photos. One showed an aerial view of a large property that looked like it had been constructed in the last ten years or so, and which sat in substantial grounds. A drive meandered up from the main road, although due to the lack of perspective it was difficult to gauge its length. A lake was clearly visible with an extensive woodland leading away from it towards a boundary wall which encompassed the entire estate. Next to the house was a substantial garage, and Adrian estimated that it might allow the storage of at least six vehicles. In the distance, he thought he recognised some features of a national park, such as the glorious mountains. Another picture was obviously of a period that existed long ago, and was of a couple dressed in a fashion that prevailed in the 1950s. Their facial similarity to Elise indicated them to be her parents. A different one showed a small, sleek jet, parked on some tarmac. Elise stood next to the nose of the craft, and by her side was a chap in what looked like a blue uniform, the four stripes on his sleeves suggesting that he was a pilot. A blue sky and bright sunshine dominated the background, so it was probably in a different, more temperate part of the world.

Adrian turned his gaze to the plain white walls, which were covered with more paintings. It was clear that there was an American theme to them all. To the right of the entrance, was a canvas that, according to the details on a plaque on the bottom of the frame, was by Thomas Moran, and was entitled *The Rockies at Sunrise.* It displayed high peaks that reached to the sky as if they were determined to escape the earth's atmosphere. The whole scene was lit by a back-glow from the rising sun's yellow and orange beams which gave a peach tint to the snow at the mountain tops.

Another by Martin Johnson Heade was called *A Study in Roses* and depicted a deep brown table on which two of the blooms and some lusciously green foliage had been carefully placed. The petals were coloured a white that was purer than Adrian had ever previously seen, and the plant's delicate scent was indicated by the trance that the bee that floated just inside the flower's trumpet seemed to be in.

To the left of the door was the largest picture that Adrian had ever seen. It was *Hudson Bay at Dusk* by Sanford Robinson Gifford. The red and orange setting rays turned the clouds that dominated the scene into an apricot and lemon hue, the sea below reflecting these tints in the waves that gently lapped around some fishing boats. The workmen in the craft were casually pulling in their nets, chatting in such an intimate manner that indicated they had known each other all their lives.

The outgoing message of the voicemail returned his attention to his handset, which issued the usual demand to talk after the tone. “Hi Shaun, it’s Adrian. You’ve got my number. I am getting really worried for you. Please could you ring me, even if it’s only to let me know you’re alright. And don’t forget, if there’s anything at all I can do, you only have to ask.”

He terminated the call, and sat for a few moments, staring blankly at an Ormolu French clock on the steel mantlepiece in an attempt to settle his turbulent emotions. The turquoise enamel face behind the crystal glass contrasted with the delicate gold and diamond hands, and the dolphins that dived and weaved around the gold and ruby encrusted case seemed so real that he thought they might leap out and frolic around the room. Yet, he only briefly noticed any of that. He was desperate to reach Shaun. Adrian was acutely aware that his friend hadn’t been able to recover from the fairly recent death of his wife. It was entirely possible that he had suffered a disastrous collapse in his mental health following his daughter’s violent demise.

Visions of the farm started to flow around his mind, in which he relived the final scene that had led to Lucy’s end. He watched himself run to her side and remembered how he had felt his whole world collapse as he witnessed her life flow away with the red blood that oozed onto the ground. He saw Shaun appear and shake his head after he had checked for signs of life. He recalled staring at the knife as it lay a few yards away, the dark red on its blade beginning to dry.

He started to whimper, first quietly and then more loudly. Would this torment never end? Would he never be able to escape the long shadow cast over him by the loss of someone he had expected to spend his remaining years with? Would his mind ever be able to detach itself from the loving future he and Lucy had planned at the farm? He shuddered as he thought about the dreadful alternative; a return to an existence dominated by the city, clients and an empty apartment?

The door opened and Elise entered. “I heard you through the door,” she said, and came over, sat next to him and engulfed him in her arms. “You really don’t look well. Are you sure you should be making these calls? They seem to bring back all of your bad memories.”

Adrian raised his head and looked at Elise through watery eyes. “It’s just that I’m really worried about Shaun. I’ve got to know how he is. He was part of my life, and I started to care deeply for him as well as Lucy in the relatively short time I knew them both. I just hope his sister is still able to keep an eye on him as I don’t think he could manage alone. I’d like to go round to his house instead of making all of these calls, but I’m worried I might intrude.”

“You really have been badly damaged, but I know that it’ll all come right eventually. Look, this afternoon I need to go to Fraser’s auction house. They’re holding a sale of American paintings, and there’s one in it that I want to try and buy. It’s part of a large collection that was owned by an American chap living in London, but he died a few months ago and his executors are selling everything. Would you like to go with me? It could be fun.”

“Yes, I think it might be a good distraction,” replied Adrian, as he attempted to wipe the tears away from his face.

Her hand dropped again, and he felt the instant arousal that only she seemed capable of inducing. “I think I might be able to provide you with a little more immediate diversion,” she whispered. “Shall we go to the bedroom, or use the settee?”

“After what you’ve just started, we’ll need to stay here. I don’t think I could manage to get very far.”

Chapter 25.

As they approached the front of the auction house, Adrian looked up at the portico that was immediately above the stout, black wooden door that they were about to enter. It certainly was grand. The two white columns supported a small roof that had images of classical Greek warriors on top of it. The building's imposing frontage consisted of sizeable stone blocks and was painted white, with large sash windows symmetrically dotted on each of the four floors.

"I hadn't realised that your flat was so close to Fraser's," said Adrian. "Did you decide to live there for that reason?"

"Partly. They seem to have the most interesting paintings for sale and I want to build up my collection. This one in today's sale is the last one I want for the American theme."

"What other topics do you want to progress?" he asked. "I noticed you've got a Renoir and a Pissarro, and another by one of the four Scottish Colourists, Peploe."

"I'd like to get more of the French Impressionists to add to the Renoir and Pissarro that you've already seen. I tried to get one by Gustave Caillebotte a couple of months ago, but I was outbid. It sold for twice what they expected. I'll keep my eye out for another one, but I also want to acquire a Berthe Morisot, particularly one that has children as the main theme. She does them so well. Other than that, I hope to find something suitable by each of the other three Colourists to match my Peploe. I'm not sure after that. Perhaps a Corot. He does lovely landscapes."

They passed into the hall which Adrian thought would have been in fashion two thousand years ago in ancient Rome. The floor was a red marble with portrayals of gladiators widely showering sand in all directions as they locked in deathly embraces. The murals on the walls depicted scenes of contemporary families reclining on long benches in their triclinia, or dining rooms, as they feasted on mounds of exotic Latin food. Yet, it was the ceiling that especially caught the eye. It was a maze of intricate white plasterwork, replicas of fruit and musical instruments intermixing with long strands of ivy.

Elise saw Adrian gazing upwards. "It's amazing, isn't it? The architecture here is another reason that Fraser's is my favourite. I've used some of the ideas from this hall for my own one at my country home."

"Oh, yes, I saw the photo of that in your lounge, and I also remember coming across some details of it when you brought your tax affairs in for me to look at. I don't blame you. That ceiling is wonderful."

“I’m thinking about having an extension built to the rear of the house to give me somewhere more appropriate to display my art collection when it reaches a suitable size. I’ll be able to create the right kind of climatic conditions for the paintings in there, but my collection is much too small for that at the moment.”

Elise took his hand and led him through a set of double doors, and into a large chamber. Although its height of about thirty feet gave an air of space, it was generally much more functional in character than the hall had been. The walls were plain yellow, and there were rows of ordinary chairs ready to receive the posteriors of the patrons who the business hoped would stump up huge amounts of cash for the items they aspired to sell. His gaze momentarily paused on a grandfather clock. It was about six feet high and was extremely ornate. The mid-brown oak case had the faded look of wood that had been separated from its tree more than two centuries ago, and had ivory inlay on the front door, behind which sat the workings. Its ticking would normally be regarded as quite loud, but with the multitudes that were expected for this sale it seemed likely that they would be barely audible.

“I always like to arrive here early so I can get my favourite position at the back,” said Elise. “It’ll let us see everyone else from here as well as the auctioneer’s podium at the front. I hope it’ll allow me to gauge my opposition more easily when I start to bid.”

People started to wander in, chatting to friends as they filled the pews. “I know quite a few of them,” said Elise as she smiled to a distinguished, grey-haired gentleman of middling years who, Adrian thought, might be about five feet six or seven inches. “That’s John Fielding,” she said, nodding her head in his direction. “He’s often my main rival here.”

“Where did he get his wealth from?”

Elise smiled. “He inherited it to start with, but went on to build a very successful financial advisory company. He’s semi-retired now and only sees a few selective clients. He mostly devotes his time to building his art collection. We have extremely similar tastes, and he thinks he’s an expert on the genre. In the past he’s declared a couple of paintings to be fakes, and because of his reputation in the sector the sales fell through. Worst of all, though, he seems prepared to spend large amounts to get the works he wants. I’ve never known him lose anything. He just keeps bidding till he wins. I hope he doesn’t go after the painting I want.”

Some side doors started to open and a few younger men and ladies who were all dressed in business attire entered. Each carried a phone and a sheath of papers. They sat at the side of the chamber and commenced an examination of the top of the pile they carried, clearly searching for some information. Adrian knew that there were many customers who were

attending the auction remotely, and these members of staff would take their instructions over the air waves and make bids in their absence. Of course, there would also be some who made their presence felt via the internet.

At that moment, Adrian's attention was distracted by the entry of the auctioneer and her assistant. "Oh, good," said Elise. "We've got Genevieve today. She trained in their Paris branch, but came over here when she married a British colleague. She usually gives the punters more time to think about their next bid than many of the others." She saw that Adrian was just about to say something, so whispered, "shhh. I think she's ready."

"Ladies and gentlemen, thank you all for coming." "We've got a lot of exciting items for sale today in our American auction. The first lot is by Thomas Hill, and is a fine example of his work. It shows the Yosemite Valley in California in winter. Can I have your first bids please?"

Adrian watched as the room started to come alive, hands holding paddles, or cards, with client numbers on them being rapidly sequentially raised. After a great deal of encouragement from Genevieve the final bidder's arm went up, and the hammer came down. "That went for much more than I would have expected. I think we've got some very determined buyers here," said Elise. "It doesn't bode well for the canvas I'm interested in."

"Do you have a limit?" he asked.

"Yes. At the moment my cash flow is a little constrained because I'm in the middle of another large project, so the highest I'll be able to manage is a million. Of course, there'll be commission on top of that to pay."

Adrian watched as a few more lots were shown to the patrons in the room, and arms were raised and lowered as the same procedure was followed. Despite Elise's statement that Genevieve gave the buyers plenty of time to assess whether they wished to increase their offer, Adrian thought that matters were progressed very swiftly, the hammer coming down on multiple lots in a short space of time.

Elise nudged him. "This is the one I want," she said. "The estimate is between £1 million and £1.5 million."

"Good luck," he said, and his gaze shifted to the front of the chamber where the next lot was being displayed by two porters. He could see that the bottom of its frame gave the details as *The Picnic* by Albert Bierstadt, and displayed a man and woman dressed in attire contemporary to the 1860s with two horses lazily grazing in the grass close-by. However, the most remarkable thing was the bright amber streams of light that flowed through the tightly packed branches of the surrounding trees and

illuminated the tiny flies that hovered just above the surface of the adjacent lake.

“That’s beautiful,” he said. “I can see why you want it,” but she clearly hadn’t heard him. Her gaze was firmly fixed on the painting.

“I’ll start at five hundred thousand pounds,” said the auctioneer. Elise raised her hand, to be swiftly outbid by Fielding. “I have five hundred and fifty. Do I have six hundred? Thank you madame,” said the auctioneer, looking at Elise.

“Do I have seven? Thank you, Mr Fielding. Do I have seven hundred and fifty thousand? Thank you madame,” said Genevieve in response to a bid by another lady.

“That’s Mary Kealer,” whispered Elise, as she raised her hand again. “I didn’t expect to see her here. She isn’t usually interested in this style of work.”

“Thank you madame,” replied the auctioneer. “I now have eight hundred. Are there any more bids? Does anyone want eight hundred and fifty thousand?” She looked around the chamber. “Thank you, Mr Fielding. I now have eight hundred and fifty thousand. Does anyone want nine hundred?”

There was a long pause, before Genevieve intervened. “If no-one wants to place another bid, I’ll close this one. Going once, going twice,” but before she brought the hammer down, Kealer’s hand went up.

“Thank you, Miss Kealer. I have nine hundred. Does anyone want to make it nine hundred and fifty?”

Again, there was a pause. The clock’s loud chime announced the time in a rather insistent manner, as if it was irritated by the constant gaps in proceedings. Everyone laughed, before the ensuing communal muttering was interrupted by Genevieve. “You see, even our ancient timepiece wants to see this stunning picture sell for a higher price. Do I have nine hundred and fifty thousand pounds? Ah, thank you Mr Fielding.” She looked around the auditorium with a smile. “I now have nine hundred and fifty. Do I have one million?” The room went silent again, as everyone looked around to see if another bid was going to be made.

“This is my maximum. I don’t hold out much hope against John Fielding, but here goes.” She raised her hand, the bid instantly being picked up by Genevieve. “Thank you, Elise. I have one million. Do I have one million one hundred thousand?”

Adrian noticed that Elise was trying to secretly watch her main rival, but he didn’t move. Genevieve scanned the room again. “I have one million.

Does anyone want to offer one million one hundred thousand? Come on, ladies and gentlemen. There must be someone who wants to offer more for this lovely painting by this very skilled artist."

"Now do you see what I mean," said Elise. "Her pauses are normally longer than her colleagues, but this time the tension's killing me."

"Fair warning. I'll ask one last time? Any further bids?"

Adrian looked over to John Fielding, who chose that moment to raise his hand to his face. Genevieve instantly picked up on the movement, and looked at him. "Was that a bid, Mr Fielding?" The chap scratched his nose, then waved the porters to bring the picture over to him. Once they had arrived, he carried out an examination of the work, retrieving a magnifying glass from a pocket for the purpose. He paused at one point, seemingly intent on scrutinising a specific aspect in the top righthand corner. Then he waved it away and shook his head. "It's a fake," he said and rose and left the room, the door banging loudly as if it shared Fielding's disgust.

There was a stunned silence for quite a long time, apart from the patient ticking of the clock. Adrian saw that the auctioneer was consulting with her colleague, then she rose and looked at the room.

"I'm sorry about the interruption. Shall we continue? I have one million pounds. Miss Kealer, would you like to raise the bid?"

Kealer shook her head. "I don't wish to pursue this painting after all."

"Thank you. Are you willing to honour your bid of one million, Elise?" asked Genevieve.

Adrian gasped as he heard Elise's answer. "Yes."

The hammer came down. "Sold for one million pounds," announced the auctioneer.

"Don't say a word," whispered Elise. "I'm not interested in anything else in this sale, so there's no point in hanging around. Let's go to the wine bar across the road and I'll explain."

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"A bottle of Chateaux Petrus please," said Elise to the waiter, and turned to look at Adrian. "Did you enjoy the auction?"

"It was certainly very entertaining. There was so much drama that the room could have been full of actors, playing out some scene that would have been better suited to the stage."

Elise laughed. “I thought you’d like it in there.”

“I must admit that I am quite confused, though. You mentioned that John Fielding is an acknowledged expert. He declared the painting to be a fake, and yet you went ahead and bought it.”

She smiled and winked. “I happen to know that it’s genuine, you see. I’m friends with a chap in Fraser’s research department. I met him at a social evening that Fraser’s held for its special clients some years ago, and we often go out to restaurants together.”

She saw him frown. “No, don’t worry,” she said, “I haven’t slept with him. We just enjoy our evenings together. Oh, and I’ve paid some of his kids’ school fees. That has also helped.”

Adrian laughed. “He knows the kind of thing I’m after, so rang me three months ago to tell me that they’d had this picture consigned to them, and that it had full provenance,” she continued.

“What does that mean?” he asked.

“They established a full paper trail for the work back to the time it was created all those years ago. They’ve found records of every single sale it’s been in since it left the artist’s studio, who owned it and where it was stored. Not only does that mean that they know for sure that it’s genuine, but also that it’s been looked after really well. So, you see, despite his reputation, John Fielding is simply wrong.”

“Oh, I see. That certainly proves the power of networking. But if everyone else withdrew their bids, couldn’t you have lowered yours? I mean you no longer had any competition, and surely they would have accepted anything after Fielding declared it to be a fake.”

“That might seem logical. But I really want that painting to complete my collection. You see, as I mentioned, the estimate was £1 million to £1.5 million. The reserve would therefore have been £1 million.”

“The reserve?” asked Adrian.

“That means they wouldn’t have sold it below that figure, and I really do want it. The other thing is that, now that doubt has been cast on its authenticity, Fraser’s would have had to publish all of its research on the painting. They don’t normally do that, but would have been forced to on this occasion because of Fielding’s accusation. That means that everyone would know that it’s genuine, and the painting would have doubtless achieved a great deal more than I’ve paid when it was brought back to be sold again. It really is an excellent picture and in other circumstances

would have attracted much more attention from buyers. I feel I've got a bargain."

Adrian quietly looked at the table for a moment. "Thank you for a fun afternoon, and I'm very glad you've got the painting, but I want to say something else. I owe you a great deal for taking me in," he whispered. "I am extremely grateful to you. I really don't know what I would have done if you hadn't come over to me in that coffee shop."

Elise reached over and gave him a quick kiss. "Don't worry about that. As I said. I fancied you the first moment we met in your office, and was very disappointed when you told me you had a girlfriend. And since we've been together, you've actually been very good company. I hadn't realised how much I've missed having a male partner, and I'm really enjoying having you around."

Adrian smiled. "So am I. I'd like to buy the next drink, partly to celebrate our relationship, and partly for you getting your picture."

"Yes, I'd like that. Both mean a great deal to me now."

Adrian smiled. "Are you comparing me to a painting?!

She looked at the table, as if in thought. "Hmmm. Let me see. I get a lot of pleasure from both. Both are stunning to look at. The character of both are complex." She looked at Adrian. "Yes, I think I am."

They both laughed.

Chapter 26.

Adrian was sitting in the kitchen of Elise's apartment, waiting for his cup of coffee to cool down enough for him to be able to drink it. As usual, he and Elise were sat opposite each other at the bar, he devouring his toast and orange juice, she munching her cereal. Then he rose and retrieved her cup from the tray on the coffee machine and handed it over, watching as the hot beverage took her to an imaginary ethereal plane. Eventually she sighed as she returned to reality.

"You really do make amazing coffee," she whispered.

"It's funny, though. I enjoy drinking it, but it never has the same effect on me. Anyway, what are your plans for today?"

"I wondered if you could amuse yourself for a short while? I need to go out to do some shopping."

"Do you want to get some food?"

"No," she answered, "it's not that. I ordered a suit from a tailor around the corner and they've made it up. They want to do a fitting in case any alterations are necessary before they finish it off. I shouldn't be too long."

"I'll be fine. I might have another cuppa to see if I can get the same experience as you do. Well, it's worth a try."

She laughed, and shortly afterwards he heard the door close. As he sat in the kitchen, he thought about his flat. He hadn't been there for quite a few weeks, and presumably there would be a pile of mail to be dealt with. Sadly, most of it would be junk; advertising from a variety of companies claiming their products would provide him with the perfect solution to a problem he didn't have.

He let his mind wander around his apartment, and he realised that it wasn't very different from Elise's, despite all of her wealth. Admittedly hers was in a posher part of the city, and the age of her neighbours was generally more advanced, indicating the time it had taken for them to accumulate the finances to purchase one of these more expensive properties. Yet, both had the same amount of space, spread over an identical number of rooms. "Hmmm," he pondered. It was strange how someone had to fork out substantially more cash for similar places, purely dependent on the two being in different streets.

If he was going to spend an indefinite period living with Elise, although he had no need to collect any more clothes, perhaps he ought to make a quick visit to his apartment to check that no problems had occurred in his absence. He was sure that insurance companies approved of that kind

of behaviour. But how would he cope if he suddenly came across something of Jemima's. Maybe her hair brush, or a bottle of her perfume that she had forgotten to remove. No, it was probably preferable not to go back just yet. And, as far as he knew, his insurance policy was perfectly in order whether he did or not.

His thoughts turned to Elise, and he smiled. She certainly enjoyed a very different lifestyle. He remembered a couple of stories she had told him in the bar last night after they'd left Fraser's. She had been staying with a friend in Monaco in their belle epoch villa near the Prince's palace, and while her chum was busy with some charity work, Elise had gone into a designer boutique with the idea of acquiring some new shoes. On entering the premises, the assistant had greeted her by saying, "welcome, Your Highness. We're honoured to have you here again." Elise was initially puzzled at this, until she noticed a photo that held a central position on a board that displayed the establishment's most prominent patrons. It was of Her Highness Charlene, wife of the ruler of the little principality in Southern France, and it was clear the two were very alike.

Matters were swiftly cleared up and a selection of exclusive footwear was brought out to help Elise make a choice. She had already tried two pairs when a subtle beeping sound was to be heard, indicating that another customer had entered. All of the staff rushed over to receive the visitor, including the one who was serving Elise. It turned out to be the real Royal, and when the Princess realised that her arrival had deprived Elise of the attention she had been receiving, Elise received an apology. And to Elise's delight, this was accompanied by a request to join her and her husband to dine at the palace that evening, along with her friend by way of an apology.

The other tale involved an invitation to stay on the fabulous yacht that another of her friends owned. It seemed that it was part of his birthday celebration, and as the forecast predicted spectacular weather, he had planned to depart from the marina where his vessel was moored to undertake a cruise. They roamed around for a few hours, enjoying the wonderfully warm heat, the blue skies and the azure water when a pod of dolphins appeared. Everyone was already in beach costumes, so one by one they jumped in and spent the rest of the afternoon swimming and playing with the aquatic creatures.

He sighed. He had really enjoyed their time in the bar last night, and had been aware that they had both increasingly relaxed as the alcohol flowed. She was excellent company, and he had found that his heart had warmed even more to her. She appeared to have a deeply compassionate side, as well as a marvellous sense of humour. When he had nervously mentioned his feelings to her, she had smiled, and then congratulated him on catching her up, stating that, in truth, she had fallen for him from the first moment they'd met, all those months ago in his office. Now, sitting in her kitchen, he realised that the companionship they shared was

providing just the kind of support he needed, and he felt a warm glow spread out from his heart.

His thoughts were interrupted at that moment by a nearby phone. He looked at the machine to see that it was Elise's. She must have forgotten it, so he picked it up and pressed the engage button.

"Hello," said a male voice. "Is that Elise?"

"No, she's not here at the moment. She's gone out to do a little shopping and left her phone behind."

"Oh, shit. I need to get hold of her urgently. Do you work for her?"

"No," replied Adrian. "She's my girlfriend."

"In that case, welcome on board. I'm Steve. I'm the press officer of one of her companies. We've been working together since she bought us, several years ago. Listen, there's been a massive cockup, and the newspapers could have a field day if they find out."

"Ah. Can I help?" responded Adrian.

"Could you give her a message? We import wine to the UK from her vineyard in the south of France. It's very good quality stuff, actually. So that we can access different parts of the wine market, we produce some that's low alcohol as well, which pays less tax in import duty when it lands in the South Coast of England. It seems that there was a problem with a very large consignment of boxes. They were all labelled with details of the low alcohol, but actually contained the high-volume stuff, so too little customs duty was paid."

"That's very serious," replied Adrian. "It's a criminal offence. The tax authorities don't like being defrauded, and could levy an extremely hefty fine for that. Let's hope they don't go after anyone in particular for this. It could mean jail time."

"I know," replied Steve. "But the worst part is the potential publicity. The newspapers are always on the lookout for things like this. You know what I mean? A large company trying to break the law to make a bigger profit for their shareholders. If it gets out it's likely that sales will plummet when customers find out."

"I don't think she'll be long. I'll tell her as soon as she gets back."

"Thanks, mate. I'm glad you're more switched on than her previous boyfriends. I think she only had them around for their looks."

"Yes, that'll be it. I'm breaking the mould as I'm ugly as sin."

Steve laughed. “See if you can get her down to the Customs warehouse at the port where the wine is being held.”

“Of course,” replied Adrian. He heard another phone ringing in the background, and Steve said, “sorry, I’d better go. I’ll be spending today in a damage containment exercise.”

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The journey down to the port hadn’t been too bad. There was a short holdup as the slow lane of the motorway was blocked due to a lorry jack-knifing, but as traffic was light the few cars there flowed round the obstacle. Adrian smiled as he remembered how annoyed Elise had been at the drivers who slowed up to have a good look at the accident as they passed. “Grisly lot. I suppose they’d be even happier if there were some dead bodies strewn around.”

They were aiming for the Customs warehouse. The wine had been impounded until the matter was resolved, and due to the unusually large size of the batch, a great deal of money was involved. And not to forget the sizeable fines that might be levied. Adrian remembered frowning when he thought about this later. In fact, from what he had previously seen of her affairs, it was clear that Elise’s company would become insolvent if they were unable to recover all of the boxes.

Getting through the gates to the pound in which the Custom’s warehouse was situated had been tricky. The large area was surrounded with twenty feet high razor wire, with high wooden posts sited every few yards on which there were CCTV cameras. The gates were daunting, being as high as the surrounding barrier, but the worst was the sound of barking that came from the vicious looking dogs. Their handlers seemed to be able to control them, but only just.

ID was presented and after the chap on the gate had made a phone call, he and Elise were waved through. “Park over there, next to the entrance to number three warehouse,” said the guard. He obviously noticed the look of alarm on their faces, and laughed. “Don’t worry. The dogs might bite, but they’ll leave you alive. You might need an ambulance afterwards, though.”

As they walked from the car to the nearest building, Adrian looked around. He could just about make out the docks in the distance, where a couple of cranes clunked and screeched as they unloaded a cargo from a ship that was moored against the harbour wall. Another vessel was nearby, awaiting its turn to be processed. Further away, the scene was repeated several times. It was clearly a busy port.

There were a number of warehouses set back about two hundred yards from the water. They all proudly displayed the names of the organisations that regularly filled and then emptied them with their goods. The nearest one intrigued Adrian. Its sign stated that it belonged to a well-known charity that collected supplies from the UK and sent them overseas to areas of the world that were distressed. He briefly imagined entering it and seeing mounds of hessian sacks piled high, awaiting their turn to be dispatched to another desperate country.

Adrian's gaze shifted to the building they were aiming for. Its construction was similar to all of the others that were dedicated to the storage of products. A breeze block wall that surrounded the lower portion of the structure ranged up about twelve feet, with a green corrugated iron one stretching from there to the metal roof a further fifty feet higher.

As they entered the place, they were greeted by a stern looking chap. "What do you want? You shouldn't be in here?"

"I've already arranged our visit with your boss, Geoff Meredale, earlier this afternoon," said Elise. "You've got a lot of my goods here, together with the paperwork. I've come to discuss it with him and sort this mess out."

There was another brief pause as the guard followed the same procedure as his colleague on the main gate, and made a phone call. "Alright," he said when he came back out of his office. "He'll see you now. Up the stairs, turn right and Mr Meredale's office is the second on the right."

They did as they were ordered, and on reaching the upper floor Adrian knocked on the door. "Come in," said the voice.

They entered, and Adrian gasped quietly as they were greeted by a man who was larger than anyone he had ever seen. Mr Meredale must have been at least six feet six inches in height, had well cut dark hair which was going a little grey in places, and piercing blue eyes. Yet, it was his shoulders that amazed Adrian. They were so wide that it was difficult to imagine how he had been able to find a jacket to fit.

The office itself was quite small. There was just enough room to house the dark wooden desk that looked so old that it could have been in use for at least the last century. There was a worn-out swivel chair on the other side in which Mr Meredale sat, with two seats awaiting the posteriors of visitors opposite. A filing cabinet occupied the space to the side. However, Adrian's attention was briefly attracted by the scene he could see being played out through the windows that stretched from one side of the rear of the room to the other. It showed that the harbour was in a bay, and hosted many ships. In addition to the cranes, workers were ferrying goods across the quays on trucks from the piles at the waterside

to the waiting warehouses. At the far end of the anchorage's righthand promontory, there was an extremely foreboding looking building which Adrian knew to be a maximum-security prison which housed extremely hardened criminals.

Meredale waved his hand to indicate that they should sit. "A bit of a cockup, wouldn't you say?" he said sarcastically. "Didn't you think we'd check inside the boxes?"

Elise smiled. "I have no idea how this happened. I can't believe anyone in my organisation would do this. I hired them all personally. I insist that all my staff have high levels of integrity, even the sub-contractors."

Meredale nodded ironically. "It seems that they're not all as honest as you thought. Trying to defraud HM Customs is a serious offence."

Elise slowly nodded her head, and was quiet for a few moments, clearly deep in thought. "So it seems. When I get home, I'll ring the manager of our contractors over there in France. I'll have a thorough investigation carried out, and the guilty person will be instantly sacked. Do you want their name when we find them?"

"I'm glad to hear that you're taking this seriously, but, no, we won't want their names. If they're in the South of France, they're out of our jurisdiction. Anyway, as head of the company, we're going to hold you responsible, personally. There's been a rise in attempts to avoid paying the correct import duties, and we want someone to make an example of."

"You don't have a leg to stand on. It had nothing to do with me, and my lawyers will have a field day with you."

"Hmmm. And, of course, in the meantime, this will get a great deal of press coverage." He frowned. "You really should have been more careful. We've got some secure rooms downstairs. You can ring your accountants to pay the correct amount, and I have to tell you that there is also a large fine. Then I'm going to detain you until we've received the funds in full. Your sidekick here is free to go, though."

"That's ridiculous," answered Elise. "I can understand that a fine is due, but you've no right to keep me here. I'll slap Customs with a law suit for hefty compensation."

"That's none of my concern," he replied, and shouted for one of his colleagues. "George, come in here a minute."

Almost immediately, another extremely beefy chap entered the room, at least as large as Meredale, and wearing a blue uniform. Pointing at Adrian, Meredale said, "escort this chap off the premises and make sure

the lady is secured in the cells downstairs. She'll probably be there for a few days. Allow her one phone call before you lock her up."

"Before you do that," interrupted Adrian, "can I see the paperwork that came with the consignment of wine? I just want to check on something."

"This stuff's confidential. Do you work for her?"

"I'm her accountant," responded Adrian. Well, a white lie was acceptable, he thought. He certainly had been.

Meredale stared at Adrian for a moment. "Wait outside George," he said, and as the door slammed, he rose from his chair, and the filing cabinet clanked as he retrieved the records from the second drawer. He handed them to Adrian, who spread them over the top of Meredale's desk and examined them. At first sight, there didn't seem to be a discrepancy. The details were certainly quite vague, but did list the number of bottles per box and the date they were dispatched from the vineyard and the distribution company's name, given as 'Feranc Distribution'. The all-important alcoholic content of the liquor was given as being low volume, which apparently matched the information on the side of the packing cases.

He looked at Meredale. "What prompted your officers to open the cases?"

"We received an anonymous tip," he replied.

Adrian looked at Elise, to see that she was badly shaken and that her face had turned completely white. Not surprising, he thought. She had come down to the docks to try and clear up an administrative mess, and perhaps authorise her company to pay a fine. Instead, she was being threatened with jail and a criminal record. "What do Feranc Distribution do?" he asked her.

She seemed to make an effort to regain some composure. "Oh, they collect the wine from the distillery after we've bottled it. They take it to their premises, which are about ten miles away, and then they pack it all in labelled boxes and transport them from there to our distributors in our various markets in Britain, Germany and Switzerland."

"So, you don't own them and they have complete control over this process?"

"Yes," she whispered.

"Are they also responsible for ensuring that the correct amount of Customs duty is paid?"

“Yes. That’s also in the contract we have with them. They invoice us and we send the money to them so that they have it in advance to pay out at the port. I think they do that electronically.”

“I see. It appears very clear to me what’s happened.” He looked at Meredale. “You’ll want to pursue Feranc Distribution for the additional duty that’s outstanding, and also for any fines that are due. My client has nothing to do with who they hire and how they run their operations. She has already handed over the full amount that was due on this shipment to her contractor, but they’ve tried to pay a smaller amount. Feranc Distribution are the guilty party, not my client. In that case, I assume we’re free to leave?”

Meredale was silent for a moment, then looked at the door and shouted for his subordinate. “George, come in here again.” The door opened and the beefy guard entered. “Change of orders. Escort these two to their car and make sure they leave the premises.”

“Before we go, I have one more question,” said Adrian. “When will the shipment be released?”

Meredale consulted a directory on his table. As he opened the front cover, Adrian saw that it had ‘HM Customs’ at the top, and was entitled ‘Companies in the Southern District’. “Feranc Distribution have a local office inside the perimeter of the docks. After you’ve left, we will impound their entire stock and premises, and suspend their licence to import goods into this country. We will also inform our European counterparts. They won’t be able to trade anywhere on the continent. I think it’s safe to say that they’ll pay up very quickly. I would think you’ll have your wine within the week.”

“Will any of them be arrested?” asked Adrian.

“Yes, probably, but who and how many is difficult to say at the moment, until we have more details. I should think the French police will also be very interested in this and will be keen to make arrests. As I said, there has been a lot of this kind of thing recently, and the French authorities are as eager as we are to make an example of a few people.”

“Thanks. Let us know if we can help with your investigations,” Adrian replied.

Meredale smiled sarcastically. “Don’t worry. We won’t hesitate. Now, I’d like you to go so that I can pop over to Feranc Distribution and give them the good news.” He looked at the guard. “See them out,” he barked.

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On regaining the car, Elise insisted that she was okay to drive. Thankfully the motorway was still quite quiet as Adrian could see that she was still shaky. Consequently, he wasn't surprised when she suggested after a short distance that they take a break at a motorway-services en route to her home in the city. There was no question that it was a good idea.

It was a concrete construction, and was surrounded by an extensive car park. There were a few vehicles, but these were outnumbered by approximately twice as many lorries. Despite its external drab appearance, Adrian was surprised by the brightness of the interior. The walls were all made of glass, allowing the infusion of large amounts of light through them. In the main thoroughfare there were the usual retail outlets, selling newspapers, snacks, accoutrements for mobile phones and a unit that housed various slot machines. A number of tables with chairs attached to them were lined up in neat rows, obviously placed there to allow customers to consume any purchases from the nearby catering franchise.

Adrian returned to where Elise was seated, carrying two cups of coffee in cardboard, disposable cups. "I watched them prepare these. The assistants didn't really pay much attention to what they were doing. They pressed a button on a machine, seemed to stare at the wall whilst the hot liquid was spewed out, then put these silly white lids on and charged me enough money that I could have bought a Rolex watch instead if I'd wished to. So, I'm sorry, but I don't think it'll be anything like mine."

Elise laughed. "I knew I brought you along for a reason. It was obviously to entertain me."

"That's better," replied Adrian. "You seem more cheerful already."

She reached over, grabbed his hand and looked into his eyes. "Thank you," she whispered. "Without you, I'd be sitting in a cell right now, trying to figure out how I was going to get out of such a mess."

"Oh, it's nothing, after what you've done for me. I was in utter despair when you picked me up in the café. I was in such a bad place that I think I might have ended up in a hospital. So, you see, I might have saved you from being incarcerated in an institution, but you did the same for me."

"Touché", she replied. "But I think it'll take a while for me to fully recover from this, so I'm not going to be much use at running my business. I guess I need a break. Would you like to come down to my little country cottage tomorrow for a few days? I might take the opportunity to have a chat with an architect about that extension to house my art collection after all, and it'll also give us time to pack this evening."

Adrian smiled. "How many rooms does your little country cottage have?"

“Fifteen,” she replied, sheepishly.

“And how many acres is the garden?”

“About two hundred. Quite small, really.”

They both laughed as they rose from the table to return to her car, the coffee remaining undrunk. “Do you think you could drive please? It might be safer,” she said.

Chapter 27.

Adrian opened the curtains. He had never seen such an amazing view. It was certainly nothing like the one from his own flat. The bright sunshine and clear blue sky overhead allowed an uninterrupted panorama all the way to the rugged mountains in the distance. There were some clouds over the highest peaks, and the snow that rested up there suggested a much colder climate than the warmth that pervaded around Elise's estate.

He scanned the more immediate vista, and smiled as he remembered a lot of the details from the photo he'd seen in the lounge in Elise's apartment. There was a straight, but narrow tarmac lane that led from the house to the lake, the surface of the water being so immense that a youngster could spend all day exploring it in a little boat and still not cover its entire expanse. From the bedroom he could just about make out the tiny ripples scurrying across the water's surface as if the wavelets were in a race to see which could reach the bank first. Maybe there was some unknown prize that they were competing for, he humorously mused.

The woodland was to the right-hand side of the tarn, the smaller trees seemingly attempting to outgrow their larger compatriots in a bid to soak up the abundance of rays being showered on them from above. There must be a light breeze, he reflected. The branches were swaying gently, the closer ones touching their neighbours in a manner that suggested that they were old friends and wished to hold hands.

The remainder of the grounds were dedicated to extensive grass pastures, in which occasional coppices were interspersed. Adrian could see that there was a wire fence that encircled the house, perhaps being a distance of two hundred meters away from the building, separating it from the rest of the grounds. On the other side of this barrier, sheep lazily grazed, occasionally ripping more green sustenance from the ground and munching on the proceeds.

He knew from the photo that there was a wall that surrounded the estate, and he could just about make out some of it where the woodland didn't block his vision. It appeared to be constructed of large, brown stone blocks, but they had been piled on top of each other in an uneven manner instead of the neat rows that he had expected. Their irregular nature hinted that they had been laid down quite a long time ago, its age signifying how robust the construction was.

On the journey down from her apartment the previous day, Elise had provided him with some of the estate's history. About twelve years ago she had concluded a particularly profitable deal, selling a company that she had acquired a few years earlier for a much smaller amount. During

the period she'd owned the business, she had worked long hours to turn its fortunes around, and felt nearly burned out. This had prompted her desire to have somewhere to escape to so that, as she put it, 'she could recharge her batteries'.

Shortly afterwards, she'd been informed by a land agent she'd hired to perform a search for a suitable location that a farm of two thousand acres, and that had been in the same family for seven generations, was being broken up into smaller sections and sold off. It seemed that the most recent generation had wished to retire and hadn't had any children to whom they could pass on the concern. She purchased one of the parcels of land, and the countryside features of the lake and woodland that went with it. It seems that her plot had been where the farmhouse and the associated gardens had been, the ancient walls that surrounded the grounds demarking the start of the farmland. She had replaced the old building with a modern, more comfortable one of her own design, fenced in a smaller patch to act as her own gardens and let a neighbouring farmer graze his animals on the rest of the extensive grass lawns. As he looked out of the bedroom window, Adrian mused that the sheep certainly enhanced the rural atmosphere and tranquillity of her 'country cottage'.

There were also a number of cottages outside the perimeter walls that came with the property, which in previous times were dedicated to housing the workers that were vital to the operation of the acreage. Elise explained that a few men retained their properties rent-free as she still employed them to look after the grounds. However, for most of the families the dwellings were no longer a requirement of their employment as they had found alternate ways to earn their income, and now paid a commercial rent. Given that she was mostly absent, Adrian was pleased to hear that she had engaged a local agent to keep an eye on things, including the cottages. Hopefully that meant that the occupants should have decent conditions to live in. It would have been so easy for dilapidations to be ignored otherwise.

Elise had risen much earlier to meet the architect, but had been insistent that he continue to rest, and he was certainly pleased to have had the opportunity to go back to sleep. He thought about how tired he'd felt since Jemima had walked out, and his fatigue had progressively deepened following Lucy's death and his discovery of Rachel's infidelity. He sighed. It wasn't surprising, he reflected. He'd read somewhere, although he couldn't remember the exact name of the journal, that anxiety had that effect on the sufferer. Elise had wanted to come down to her second home to have a break, but that also enabled him to do so too.

Before closing the door to depart for her early meeting, she had suggested that, as she might be engaged for some time, he might like to go for a walk as it was such a nice day. She had mentioned a specific route which involved leaving the proximity of the estate, skirting its walls

and eventually reaching the tied houses. Given their historic age, he had thought that they might be very interesting to look at.

After he had showered and breakfasted, he exited the front door and wound his way down the little lane that led to the front wall and the gate that attempted to exclude unwanted visitors. It really was lovely out here. The rural sounds were intoxicating. There was the faint trickling of water in the distance, birds chirped as they flew passed and there was a delightful backdrop caused by a busy conversation going on between the sheep. The temperature was very warm, and the breeze that had affected the trees that he'd witnessed from the bedroom brought a delicious cooling effect.

It didn't take long to reach the gate. It was an enormous light wooden barrier, the vertical planks giving the impression that they were held in place by their less numerous horizontal cousins. He touched the button that was positioned on the post to the side, and stood out of the way as the impressive portals were slowly swung open by the electronic gadget that controlled them.

Although the lane outside the estate eventually opened out onto an ordinary road, Elise had mentioned that the little track that spun off to the left, immediately outside the grounds, would take him on the route she had proposed. It was mostly constructed of mud, with stones dotted over its surface to provide the element of firmness that he knew would be essential in the more inclement seasons.

As he walked along the path, he recalled the one where Lucy had met him and had provided a very welcome intrusion into his misery. There were several similarities. Both were in a stunning pastoral location. Both were suffused with beautiful blooms in the nearby hedgerows. Both were surrounded by a countryside in which farmers toiled for endless hours to eke out a living.

Yet, there were enough differences that prevented his emotions being affected by the memories of his rural encounter with the lady he had hoped to spend his future with. He wasn't currently progressing down a sunken lane. The Spring season with all of the joys of the re-establishment of nature's domain over Winter's deathly grip had moved onto the lushness of Summer, in which the foliage was in the full flow of growth. And, most importantly, there weren't any reminders of the harrowing memories of Jemima's unfaithfulness and the collapse of the dreams that he thought they'd both cherished. He wasn't staying in the same hotel. There wasn't any boulder on which they had both sat and laughed away whole afternoons. And the experiences of the trips that he and Jemima had made to that area to celebrate their anniversaries were replaced with a calmer, and more enduring relationship that was sited in a place that Elise had permeated with the strong force of her personality.

She owned the district, and as he walked down the trail, he imagined that he could see her guiding hand in everything around him.

He started to wonder whether he might have a future with Elise. He certainly enjoyed the time he spent with her, and she had firmly stated that she reciprocated his growing affections for her. Her beauty was unquestionable, but there was something else without which it seemed unlikely that his heart would have been engaged, but which was difficult to precisely define. Perhaps it was because she was such an enigma; she determinedly pursued anything she wanted, and yet there was a vulnerability that occasionally escaped, such as that time at the docks when she had been close to incarceration.

The voice interrupted his thoughts. “Oh, hello. You must be new. We don’t get many strangers around here since the lady bought the estate.”

Adrian initially had trouble releasing his mind from his reflections on Elise, and their potential time ahead together, and looked at the man. He was about middle height, with unruly, dark hair. It was almost as if the strands had never been introduced to a brush, and now were completely dedicated to randomly following their own agenda. He had what Adrian thought could only be called a crooked nose, possibly from having been involved in an accident sometime in the past, his bushy eyebrows topping small hazel eyes. His clothes were quite shabby, consisting of a baggy blue t-shirt underneath dirty and faded dungarees, the chap’s feet being encased in robust looking but heavily scuffed black boots. Yet, his rough appearance was considerably softened by his charming smile which transformed a face that might have reflected a life spent in hardened circumstances into a friendly and cheerful welcoming demeanour.

“Yes,” replied Adrian. “I’ve never been here before. Its such a nice day, so I thought I’d go for a walk.”

“I don’t blame you. I’ve been making the most of it too. There’s a lot to do on her estate at this time of the year.”

“Oh, so you’re one of the guys who looks after her grounds. It’s a lovely place to work. Have you been doing that for long?”

“Yes,” responded the man, “and my father, and three generations before that. Of course, back in those days it was mostly agricultural stuff, like sowing in the Spring and harvesting in the Autumn. And there were loads more men employed to look after everything.” He looked a little wistful for a moment. “But the farm was a lot bigger than the size of her ladyship’s estate. At certain times of the year, we worked from dawn till dusk, yet no-one minded. There was a happy camaraderie amongst everyone. That’s all gone now.”

“Yes,” answered Adrian reflectively. “It seems to be the way of the world these days.” He held out his hand and they shook. “I’m Adrian.”

“Pleased to meet you. I’m Jacob. Look, I was working on some trees on the other side of the gates, and only popped back to have a cuppa. Would you like to come in?”

“Yes, thanks.”

“The only thing is, you’ll have to overlook the mess,” added Jacob.

Jacob led the way, and as Adrian entered the hall, he had to step over some wellington boots and dog leads. He realised that a family of four lived here because, attached to the side, about head height, was a rack which held coats of various sizes. One or two were clearly for Jacob, the lady’s ones presumably being for his wife or partner, and the smaller items obviously belonged to children. Yet, the most noticeable aspect was the unpleasant odour. He looked at the walls and ceiling which must originally have been painted in white, but their current underlying cream patina up to about waist level was covered in a black mould.

Adrian followed Jacob into the kitchen, the earlier disorganisation being repeated here. He judged that the table would easily be able to sit six, but the top was covered with so much detritus that it seemed impossible for more than a couple of people to be able to use it at the same time. There was a jumble of school exercise books, magazines with intriguing front covers that displayed various agricultural items such as tractors and farm animals, and some electronic objects such as mobile phones.

The other part of the area was clearly devoted to cooking, and consisted of dark brown units encompassing cupboards and a large cooker that consisted of eight rings. Numerous dirty plates and other utensils littered the sink as well as work tops. This was obviously the heart of the little community’s life, and indicated a busy but close-knit unit. A clear sign of that was their ability to tolerate such chaos in their shared space.

There were large, single-paned windows that lined the far side of the room, which looked onto a small garden. It seemed to repeat the disarray that dominated the indoors. The grass on the small, unattended lawn had reached about three feet in height, and the nearby tiny flowerbeds were so overgrown that it was impossible to see any of the earth that they obviously grew in. A high hedge of perhaps ten or twelve feet surrounded the patch, its unkempt condition proving that it hadn’t experienced the attention of any cutters for a significant period.

However, once again, the odour was repeated in the kitchen, and he wrinkled his nose in discomfort. “I know. That smell is bad, but I guess we’re used to it now. We, well, sort of just put up with it, but I wish it could be fixed. There’s a leak in the roof, and every time it rains it lets in

water, which flows down into various parts of the house. Last year it got a lot worse, and now the downstairs is affected by the mould, as you can see."

There was a little pause while Jacob bunged tea bags into a couple of cups, poured in the hot water and stirred a fraction of milk in, then he joined Adrian at the table, greedily slurping his brew. "Sorry for the noise when I drink. I'm so used to having to rush my breaks and it's the only way I've found of dealing with something hot."

Adrian took a sip from his mug. "It's fine. Is this one of the tied cottages?"

"Yes," replied Jacob. "I was brought up here as a nipper, then took it over completely when my parents moved into a care home down the road. There's three bedrooms upstairs, so its big enough for Shirl, sorry Shirley, she's my wife, and our two kids, Oliver and Hazel. They're all out now, of course. The children are at school and Shirl's at work."

"What does she do?"

"She works for the local shop behind the counter. She has long hours and they're always asking her to do overtime instead of hiring someone else. It's so they can save money. I wish she could be at home more, but to be honest, even though we've got a free house, we still need the extra money she gets. We'd really like to change our jobs, especially if we could earn more, but in such a rural area there isn't much employment. I guess we're lucky to even have these ones."

"What would you do instead?" asked Adrian.

"Anything, as long as it pays enough. We just want to get away from here. Oliver is only six, and as soon as he comes home, he starts coughing. The doctor has told us that it's because of the mould and that we need to move, but we don't earn enough to save up the deposit we'd need to rent somewhere else."

Adrian looked around the room again. He felt envious of Jacob, despite his circumstances. His close-knit and loving family totally contrasted with the solitary life he led, and the series of romantic relationships he had recently flowed through. The love that the family shared was evident every where he looked, and in the manner Jacob talked about his family, whereas Adrian's existence had been empty since Jemima's unfaithfulness.

"Have you mentioned the condition of your home to the agent?" he asked.

Jacob laughed. “Yes. Constantly, and he always promises to fix the house. But it’s funny how there’s inevitably yet another excuse as to why he can’t do anything.”

“Have you thought about going above his head. Maybe you could contact the owner?”

“Of course, but we daren’t do it. Fred, who used to live next door with his family, threatened to do that, and within a month he was evicted. He lost his job too. That meant he was homeless, and only had a roof over his head because the local council put him and his family up in a bed and breakfast. You know what I mean? They’ve had to share that one room for over two years now.”

“What about the people in the other houses? The ones that pay rent? Are their houses in the same condition?”

“Yes,” answered Jacob. “Mould, damp, and one’s even infested with mice. The kids of the family that live there are terrified of the creatures, and we often hear their squeals of fright when they’ve seen one. Jim tried refusing to pay his rent, but it only took the agent two months to get him evicted.”

“Surely no-one else would rent the house in that condition, and the owner would notice that they’re not getting rent?” asked Adrian.

“You’d be surprised. People from the town look at the countryside and think how idyllic it seems, but they have no idea of the poverty and homelessness that exists here. Wages are low, so locals often have to share houses with their parents till they’re much older than those in the city have to do, even when they’ve got a family. Jim’s rent was cheap because of the state of the place, so there was a queue of customers who were willing to take it on. It had new occupants within a week. That shows what the agent is like, so it’s obvious that we couldn’t complain. We’d never be able to find anything else.”

Adrian sighed. He’d never imagined that such horror existed in such beautiful rural surroundings. The contrast between these hovels and Elise’s magnificent property was stark. Surely, she must know about the conditions that her tenants endured. After all, she deeply engaged herself in all of her businesses, so it was difficult to accept that she wasn’t similarly aware of the conditions that prevailed in these dwellings. And, of course, she had displayed her deep emotional side to him. It was inconceivable that someone who was so sensitive could leave such dreadful circumstances unrectified.

“This is terrible. You shouldn’t have to put up with this situation. I’m staying with Elise at the moment. Will you trust me to mention this to her. I’d like to see if I can get some action started.”

Jacob looked out of the window for a moment, clearly considering what Adrian had said, then his gaze returned to the kitchen. “Hmmm. I’m not sure. That would be very risky. I can’t afford to lose my job and house. Our kids are settled into the local school, and I think my wife would be very lucky to get another job if we had to move away.”

“I can understand how you feel, but I’ve done her a couple of favours recently. I think she might listen to me.”

“Okay. But don’t tell my wife. She’d kill me for agreeing to it.”

“Leave it with me. I’m determined to try and sort this out.”

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Adrian reclined in his chair, and looked round the dining room in Elise’s home. There was light wooden panelling that covered the walls from the floor upwards, with various portrait paintings scattered on them. One was particularly noticeable. It was of a lady who had tightly permed grey hair, and a face that still held an innate beauty. Her eyes seemed so gentle that they might induce someone to share their deepest secrets with her. A young chap in military uniform was formerly posing in another. The character was clearly an army officer, but the style of his clothing denoted that the canvas had been created many years ago, perhaps prior to his dispatch to the Western Front in the First World War. Adrian briefly wondered if he had survived that holocaust, or been crippled for life like so many others of that generation.

The ceiling was heavily plastered with angelic cherubs that appeared to play their tiny harps as they flew through the ether. In the centre was a picture that showed a rural scene, some men toiling in the fields to harvest the wheat, others having a momentary break from their labour as they leant on their scythes. Haystacks were scattered around, a chap leading a horse and cart moving between them in an effort to place the dried grass in the rear of the vehicle.

Adrian’s gaze moved to the table on which he and Elise had eaten their meal. It was of a dark wood; maybe oak with a mahogany veneer that was incredibly well polished. They were sitting on opposite sides, with the silver candelabra and its six candles providing the only light. The plates were clearly very expensive, and had a plain white centre with yellow swirling patterns at the edge of the bowl, and gold leaf rings around the sides.

Adrian watched as the servant disappeared from the room with the last of the dirty dishes so that they finally had some privacy. “That truly was a wonderful meal,” said Adrian. “Your cook is a marvel.”

“You’d better not let him hear you call him a cook. He’d come after you with a meat cleaver. He thinks of himself as a chef. But I agree, he’s particularly good. I met him at a five star hotel when I was staying in Egypt. I’d gone there on business, and I had to go to reception to sort out a little problem with the bathroom. He was standing there chatting to the clerk behind the counter, and I heard him moaning about how much he hated being in that country. I’d already sampled his creations in the hotel restaurant for two days, so I knew how good he was. I offered him a job here. I must say that he didn’t think twice about whether to accept. That was three years ago.”

“Did you get the footman who served us this evening with the meal in the same hotel? He was excellent too.”

“No,” replied Elise. “It was in Switzerland. He was at another top hotel where I stayed when I was on business over there. He was pining for his girlfriend back in this country. I think they were childhood sweethearts. They’d been apart for a few years, and he didn’t hesitate to work for me when I asked him.”

“You certainly know how to choose your servants,” replied Adrian.

“Actually, I’d say I have a special talent for selecting my men. Those two are excellent at what they do. And then there’s you. As I said, I knew I wanted you the first moment we met in your office.”

Adrian’s face turned red in embarrassment. “I wish the circumstances that allowed us to get together hadn’t happened, but I’m definitely extremely glad you picked me up in that coffee shop.”

“When I saw you sitting there, your face hanging down to the floor in misery, I decided that you wouldn’t escape me a second time, no matter what it took. I think I’m falling quite deeply for you.”

“I feel the same,” replied Adrian. “I never thought that someone could pick me up after the way Rachel treated me. And not only have you looked after me, you’ve also won quite a large part of my heart. I don’t know what I would have done without you.”

“You have no idea how happy it makes me to hear you say all of that. To be honest, I hate being away from you. In fact, I had great trouble letting you leave me this morning for your walk as I knew I’d miss you. By the way, how did you get on?”

“You were right. This is a stunning area. I went along that path you told me about, and loved the scenery. When I reached the cottages, I bumped into a chap called Jacob. Do you know him?”

“Yes, his family worked for generations on the farm that existed before all of the land was broken up and sold off. He helps keep my garden under control now. Actually, he does a really good job. He knows a great deal about the plants, and the condition of the soil on the estate.”

“Yes, as I walked towards the gate, I could see how well the grounds are maintained. And he seemed really nice. He had gone back to his house for a cuppa during his break and he invited me in. I thought his home would be really charming. You know, full of character and historical details. Instead, the walls were covered in mould and there were large damp patches.”

Elise leaned back on her chair. “What do you mean? If you’re teasing me, it’s a rotten joke.”

“No, I’m not having you on. Actually, the smell was awful, and things are so bad that his six year old son seems to have a permanent chest problem because of it.”

Elise sat silently for what to Adrian felt like twenty minutes, but was actually about five. Eventually she whispered, “that’s dreadful. Will you leave that to me. I’ll look into it, and if it’s as bad as you say, I’ll have it dealt with straight away. I’ll put the family up in a hotel while the work’s being done.”

“I knew you wouldn’t let the family continue to live in such conditions. The next issue is that all of the cottages down there are in a similar or worse state. One even has a rodent infestation. And the tenants are too scared to complain to the agent. Those that have done so have been promptly evicted. Another chap who worked for you, Fred, did just that and not only was he thrown out of his home, but he lost his job too. I chatted to two of Jacob’s neighbours and found how much some of them have been paying in rent; £600 a month. Do you receive that?”

“I most certainly do not. Occasionally the agent deposits £200 into my bank account for those properties that are commercially tenanted, but mostly I don’t get anything. He gives me a lot of different excuses, but usually they relate to the person having lost their job or someone having been ill for quite a long time, so they have no earnings. It would be terrible if we evicted them, especially as I believe most of them have families. And, as you know, I don’t want any bad publicity. My business affairs could be adversely affected.”

“And yet, from what they told me, none have missed their payments. It sounds like the agent’s been receiving the money and keeping most of it. Of course, that’s fraud.”

“As I said. I will look into this, and if it’s as you say, the agent won’t be working for me for much longer. And I will absolutely be referring the

matter to the police, through my legal department. If this ever gets out, at least I'd be able to show that I stamped on the problem from a great height."

"The only problem was that I promised Jacob that he and his neighbours wouldn't be evicted, and that he wouldn't lose his job," said Adrian. "Will you be able to honour that for me?"

Elise came around the table and sat next to him, took his hand and looked deeply into his eyes. "Of course, no-one will be evicted or turfed out of their jobs. Will you trust me?"

Adrian looked at her. His heart juddered as she leaned over and they shared a lingering kiss. Eventually he said, "of course, but you'll need a new agent."

"Actually, I think I know of someone already. Peter worked on a neighbouring estate and I was very impressed with what he did there. I've met him at a couple of functions that he attended at his employer's house, but he resigned a few months ago to help his wife through her illness. She's recovered now, so he's looking for a job. I'll speak to him tomorrow, and get him to sort out the houses as his first priority."

When the footman came in to clear the last of the dishes ten minutes later, the room was empty. He rolled his eyes, and sighed as he commenced his task. It seemed that they'd already retired for the evening, so wouldn't be having coffee to finish the meal after all.

Chapter 28.

As Adrian walked down the footpath again, he watched a starling that was flying about fifty feet above him. It soared on an eddy of wind, then dived and recovered, dived again and then steeply rose into the air before dropping and rising once more. He smiled. It was if the creature was totally care-free and playing a game that only it knew the rules of. Or maybe it was practicing for a competition, he mused. It certainly stood a good chance of winning, if that display was anything to go by. Another bird joined the first, and together they engaged in an aerobatic display that would have been very entertaining to an audience at a circus.

A horse's whinny drew his attention, and he wandered over to the farm gate that contained the noble animal. It was slowly chewing some grass, and he imagined that the look in its eyes suggested its surprise that he didn't want to taste some of the delicious meal as well. Adrian gently patted the steed's head, and wondered if the slight shake of its ears signified a joy at receiving such attention.

"You're a beauty, but I'm going to leave you now."

Further on, he passed a tall oak, its trunk covered in a mass of ivy. He smiled as he reflected that their intimacy suggested they were preparing for a marriage ceremony, where they would promise to stay together through illness and health, or whether they were rich or poor. Are such ceremonies available to plants? And if so, what would the offspring of such an odd couple look like!

The noise of an engine diverted his attention, and he turned to see that a quad bike was coming up the path behind him. The chassis looked like it was probably meant to be red, but it was a little difficult to be certain as it was covered in so much dirt. He had heard that this was the modern way that farmers got around the countryside, and could appreciate that it probably provided a little more flexibility in the type of land that could be traversed than a jeep.

Adrian stood and waited for it, and could see that the driver was aged around his mid-forties, and although he was of slight build, he was obviously very fit. His blond hair had some grey intermingled amongst it, and he was wearing blue jeans, and had a red jumper underneath his green puffer jacket. From his poise on the machine, it was clear that he was no novice to this mode of transport, his knees taking the buffets that the uneven ground inflicted.

The quad stopped about two yards before it reached Adrian, the engine idling in a manner that suggested that it resented being prevented from progressing its journey. "Hi, you must be Adrian," said the rider. "I'm Peter. Elise has told me about you. I wondered when we'd meet. She

hired me a few days ago and insisted that my first priority was to sort out the cottages in her absence."

"Well, in that case, it's nice to meet you, and welcome on board. Yes, she's had to go into the city for some business meetings, and to get an update from her genealogist. She's also thinking about supporting a musical charity, and wanted to visit them at their offices to find out more about their activities. So, she suggested that I stay here to relax while she's away."

"I guessed at the business stuff, but I didn't know that she was pursuing her family tree?"

"Yes," replied Adrian. "Elise has some Scottish roots, and the lady who's doing the work managed to get back to the early seventeen hundreds, but then she hit a brick wall. It seems that she might have come up with a solution now."

"That could be really riveting. I'd love to look into my family history, but I never get the time to make a start. My father told me that we were linked to some highwaymen as well as someone who won the Victoria Cross in the Indian Mutiny in the eighteen fifties."

"That sounds fascinating. I'll bet my lot were all something like accountants."

Peter laughed. "And what was this about the charity work she's involved in?"

"Oh, that was one of my ideas, actually," replied Adrian. "She felt really guilty after I told her about the dreadful conditions that her tenants were living in, so in addition to having all of the properties renovated, she wanted to establish a long-term relationship with a charity that's involved in improving the lives of others. A friend of mine graduated from a top musical conservatoire in the city about three or four years ago. She plays the violin and was leant a good instrument by the institution, but she had to give it back when she left. The trouble was that she needed something really special to play on so that she could show her talent to the best effect when she attended the auditions and competitions that all youngsters have to go to so they can get a job. But they are so expensive that almost none of the kids can afford one. My chum discovered a charity that loans top-level violins purchased by wealthy patrons to talented youths, and I suggested to Elise that it would be a good way of giving something back to a part of society which is just starting out in life."

"Wow," replied Peter. "That's certainly a worthy cause. Well done on suggesting it. I hope that works out."

“Thanks.”

“Elise mentioned your interest in the cottages. I’m just on my way there now, if you’d like to come along. I received a call from one of the tenants, Geoff Grey, a couple of days ago. He’d gone round first thing in the morning to his elderly neighbour before he went to work to check if he wanted anything. He does that every day, and his wife does bits of shopping for the chap, apparently. Anyway, Tom didn’t answer the door and as Geoff’s got a spare key, he went in to find Tom lying on the floor in the kitchen. An ambulance was called, but Tom was pronounced dead and his body was taken off to the hospital.”

“That’s awful. How long had he been lying there?”

“I think about 24 hours. It must have happened soon after Geoff called round the previous morning. He lived completely alone.”

“Has anyone notified his family?” asked Adrian.

“I found a letter on the kitchen table from the solicitors, Hayreem and Leadlow. I paid them a visit yesterday to find out if he had anyone elsewhere, but they told me his wife, Olive, died a few years ago, and there’s no-one else. As I am the agent, they told me that his will leaves everything to Elise. It seems that she was very kind to Olive in her last illness, bringing down a specialist at her own cost from the city to see if anything extra could be done, and then in the final few days Elise paid for a private hospice to ease her suffering.”

Adrian was quiet for a moment. “That was a really sweet thing to do. But if he’s been living there, I don’t suppose he had much to leave her.”

“No, I don’t suppose so either. But it shows how much he appreciated her help at that critical time. I’ve not been round to that house at all yet as I needed to deal with some urgent repairs at another property, but I’m on my way there now. Would you like to come along? You could give me a hand to look through things. We’ll need to have a clear out before we can relet it.”

“Okay. I’m not doing anything else.”

“Good. Put the spare helmet on and climb on the back.”

The journey was comparatively short, although Adrian was buffeted around so much that, when he dismounted, he found his legs were really stiff. The quad was clearly a very useful vehicle, he reflected, and there was unquestionably a skill involved in operating it over this rough terrain, but it definitely wasn’t built for comfort. Elise wouldn’t roam about her estate on one. She’d almost certainly use a luxury jeep.

“Have you got somewhere safe I can leave the helmet?” asked Adrian.

“Just leave it on the seat,” laughed Peter. “Don’t worry, no-one will nick it. I can tell you’re from the city.”

They paused by the front door as Peter retrieved a bundle of keys from his puffer jacket pocket. The bunch jingled as he tried various ones, then rolled his eyes. “Would you believe it? It just had to be the last one that worked. Sod’s law.”

As soon as they entered, the same smell assaulted Adrian’s senses as he had encountered at Jacob’s house. The walls which he could see had originally been painted in a light yellow were now almost entirely black with mould, and the floorboards seemed so insecure that they appeared to wobble as he walked on them. On moving into the kitchen, he saw that it was equally infested with the fungus-like substance.

“Poor sod,” said Peter. “Imagine living like this.”

“Do you know what’s happened to the previous agent?”

“Yes, he’s been arrested and charged with fraud,” replied Peter. “The police looked through the estate’s various accounts and bank statements and it didn’t take them long to discover what he’s been up to. Serves him right.”

“What a scumbag!”

“You said it, buddy.” Peter looked around, and then sighed. “I have to get this house cleared quickly so that I can have the work done on it. I need to get another tenant in promptly. But, don’t worry, I’ll make sure it’s all fixed up properly. Right, there are two rooms upstairs, the front room and this kitchen downstairs, and there’s a cupboard under the stairs off the hall to check through. The toilet’s outside, but I can’t imagine that Tom kept anything valuable in there. We’re trying to find items that might have some value for Elise. After that, I’m afraid we’ll need to have the rest taken to the local tip. I’ll make a start in here. Which do you fancy taking first?”

I’ll check the lounge and then the cupboard off the hall.”

Adrian wandered through to the front room and stood in the centre of it for a moment, scanning the jumble of items that constituted a person’s life. There were a couple of photos on the mantlepiece, the two people in them presumably being Tom and Olive in their younger days. They were obviously on holiday, a fact signified by the clear blue sky, and the sun and sea and a couple of palm trees in the background. He picked the first one up, and sighed as it disintegrated in his hand. The damp over the years had even affected the record of Tom’s precious memories.

Above the fireplace there was a black and white picture of the same duo in the porch of a church. She wore a simple white wedding dress, with a similarly coloured band through her hair and a small posy of flowers in her clasped hands. He was clad in an army uniform, his hair cut to the short military regulation length and his boots so shiny that they could easily have acted as mirrors. There was a handwritten caption on the blank edge that surrounded the smiling couple that stated that this was their wedding in 1942. Adrian felt very sad that even this momento of such an important occasion was as badly mottled as its companions.

He scanned the rest of the room. There were a couple of chairs and a small settee, but their covers were slightly ripped, allowing the internal foam to be clearly visible. They were situated around an old television, but when Adrian tried to turn it on, all he heard was a ‘phutting’ sound and the screen remained blank. The moisture had apparently got into the electrics. What on earth would they be like in the rest of the property! The place must be a death trap, and Tom was lucky to have survived so long without being electrocuted.

There was obviously nothing in here of any value, so he wandered into the hall and opened the door to the cupboard under the stairs. It was quite high inside, so he walked in and was amazed to discover that there was no sign of the dreadful odour that pervaded the rest of the house. There was an old radio on a shelf in front of him that only seemed to work on electricity. So, he cautiously pushed the plug into the nearby socket that was about waist height on the closet’s wall, and was amazed to be greeted by the beautiful sound of Rachmaninov’s third piano concerto.

He turned the machine off, and reached over to some paperwork that stood next to the wireless. He picked it up and, again, was stunned. It didn’t disintegrate. It was obvious, therefore, that the cupboard’s door had sheltered the contents from the prevailing damp, allowing everything to remain dry. This enabled him to read the letter’s contents. It described the details of how Tom had won his Military Medal in early 1944 at the battle of Monte Casino in Italy. His officer had been killed, and in order to prevent a German machinegun nest from decimating the battalion of about eight hundred men which was pinned down and vulnerable, as sergeant, Tom had led his platoon up a steep incline to attack it. The fire had been withering and the assault had resulted in fifty percent casualties, but had ultimately been successful. The box with the little metal award and its accompanying ribbon lay next to the written citation that described the action, and were in pristine condition. Something to be extremely proud of, thought Adrian, and should definitely have a value.

He looked around the space again. Mostly, it consisted of old machinery such as a vacuum cleaner, an ancient iron, an old drill and a fan.

Presumably each one would be in working order, but he doubted that an antique dealer or anyone else would be interested in them. Beyond them he spotted an old box in a corner. He reached through the gloom and coughed as the dust that had collected on top of it filled the air.

It was made of a light wood and was just over a foot high, and the sides spanned about five or six inches between the four corners. There was a label on the front which was dated many years ago, and which stated that this was a gift from Tom's employers on the occasion of his retirement in the knowledge that he liked drinking old, single malt whiskies.

Adrian nervously slid back the wooden lid, and pulled out the bottle. There was nothing else on it apart from the gold-coloured cap and seal on the top of the neck that was meant to prevent the evaporation of the contents, and a hand-written label on a white background stuck to the front of the glass. He almost dropped the item in shock after reading the note. It couldn't be, could it?

He placed the alcohol back into its container and wandered through to the kitchen where Peter was sitting on a chair, examining a piece of crockery. "I've been checking for anything that might denote a famous brand of porcelain like Spode or Minton, but there's nothing so far. It's a shame as there's some very pretty stuff here, but even if any of it might have been of interest, almost all of its cracked. It must be worthless. Everything else in here is so badly affected by the mould that it'll need to be thrown away. Such a shame, really. Tom and Olive obviously liked it all."

He looked up. "Are you alright, buddy? You look as white as a sheet."

Adrian sat down and put the wooden box on the table. "I've been through the lounge but, like in here, everything has been ruined by the damp. Then I started to check the cupboard. It's all dry in there, so the door must have protected the contents from the moisture. I've found Tom's award from the war. It's the Military Medal. And it has its citation with it."

"A war hero! And to think someone like that has been treated so badly by being made to live in these horrible surroundings by the last agent. Well, hopefully a collector who appreciates such memorabilia will buy it. Anything else?"

"Yes. You're not going to believe this, but I found a bottle of whisky. It appears that Tom liked a tipple but he's not touched this one. It seems that his employer gave him this when he retired. The thing is, though, that it might not just be an ordinary one. There's a hand-written label that suggests that it could be from the Macallan distillery, and was distilled in 1926. Previously, when I was going through a client's records to try and straighten out their tax affairs, I noticed that he'd purchased a

bottle of the stuff. It's remarkable. I think it will need to be examined by a specialist before we can be sure, but if its genuine, Elise is going to have a lovely surprise. Of the 40 bottles that were produced, twelve had labels decorated by the pop artist, Peter Blake, another twelve by Valerio Adami and fourteen were used as the foundation of a notable series of collectable releases. That left two, and the label of one of them was created by the Irish chap, Michael Dillon. The point is that no-one knows the whereabouts of the fortieth one. It's missing. Maybe this was so sentimental to Tom that thankfully he couldn't drink it and just tucked it away, leaving us to find it."

Peter whistled in surprise. "I don't believe it. Are you having me on?"

"I really don't know. I do think it needs to be checked by an expert though."

"How can you tell that it's genuine if it's not got a proper label? I mean, you can hardly open it to find out. It wouldn't be worth anything, then."

"True," replied Adrian thoughtfully. "But there are other ways, I believe. My client bought his at auction, but wanted to have it officially verified in case he'd bought a dud and needed to raise a claim against the auction house. They can check certain elements of the base of the bottle, that the seal and the label are both correct, but most importantly, he sent it to a university in Scotland who tested the liquid without having to open it. They use a laser that passes through the whisky whilst it's still sealed, and during the trials when they were initially developing the machine, their readings proved 100% accurate."

"That sounds amazing. Well, if it proves genuine, I think Elise is going to be extremely grateful to you. I certainly wouldn't have spotted that. How much do you think it would be worth, if it's real?"

"According to the auction results I needed to research to help value my client's assets for tax purposes, at least one million pounds. Possibly even more."

"Yes, indeed. My boss might well be getting a lovely surprise. I hope she thanks you properly."

Much as he tried, Adrian couldn't stop his face turning red in embarrassment.

Chapter 29.

Adrian's gaze wandered around the lounge in Elise's country home. It was a delightful room, he decided. Its cosiness was enhanced by the delicate, square shape of the room, with a wood burning stove under the elaborate mantlepiece, the flames leaping as if they were trying to burn their way through the apparatus's roof so they could escape up the chimney.

The fire place's surrounds were covered with tiles that had obviously been retrieved from an older property, their shiny light pink surface mirroring reflections from the warming blaze. The ledge above that consisted of a slab of slate, and seemed so old and heavy that it could have been hewn out of a rock structure that was formed at the same time that the planet was created.

The white colour of the two other interior walls provided an excellent backdrop to her collection of Impressionist paintings. There was a remarkable one by Claud Monet in which the moon cast a long reflection on the sea and shoreline, on which a single rowing boat had been casually abandoned. In another by Frederic Bazille, a beautiful young lady sat on a log on a hillside overlooking an ancient, picturesque town. A third one by Pierre-Auguste Renoir showed the explosion of red, orange and yellow rays over a lake as the sun set behind a range of distant mountains.

The fourth side of the chamber consisted of a bank of windows with French doors in the middle that allowed access onto a large stone terrace. Beyond that, Adrian could see the rose garden and watched mesmerised as the bees busied themselves around the flowers in the fading twilight, moving on from one to another in what seemed like a random pattern, but one which obviously had a great deal of meaning to the little creatures. He reflected that honey produced from such beautiful red, orange, white and yellow blooms, and their associated stunning delicate scent, must taste like the kind of nectar that God had provided to Adam and Eve in their fateful garden adventure.

"Sorry about that," said Elise as she entered the room and sat of the settee next to Adrian. "It was from the charity and I thought I'd better take it."

"Well, don't keep me in suspense. How did you get on in the city?"

She pretended to punch his arm. "You really are impatient, aren't you. Actually, it all went fine. Well, except for the business aspects. The guy in charge of one of my projects has let the costs get too high, so we had to go through the numbers to try and work out how they could be reduced.

We run the risk of making an overall loss otherwise. That took quite a bit longer than I expected."

"That sounds like slack management to me," replied Adrian. "Is it too late to replace him?"

Elise was thoughtful for a moment. "Yes, I think so. It would take his replacement too long to get up to speed which would add even more cost. The worst bit, though, was that he'd purchased some items that weren't tax deductible. I had a real go at him for that."

"If I'd been overseeing that work as your tax accountant, I'd never have let any of that happen. It's basic stuff. As I'm not there, I assume you're still using the firm I work for. I can't believe any of my colleagues would be so dumb."

Elise's face went a little red with embarrassment. "As you weren't there, I swapped to another firm. That last time I went there on the day I met you in the coffee shop was my final meeting with them," she said sheepishly. "And your organisation was starting to get much more expensive than your main competitor."

"Does that mean we've permanently lost your account?"

"Probably. At least until you go back. I'll follow you."

Adrian smiled, and leaned over and gave her a kiss. "How did the rest of it go?"

"The genealogist has come up with something amazing. Her name's Liz. She had traced my family line back to the early seventeen hundreds to my ancestor called James, as you know, but then drew a blank. She went up to the parish in Scotland and found out from a local historian that the records had been moved to a central office in Edinburgh. She stayed in a hotel in the city for a couple of days, and found in the burial registers that James was interred in what they termed all those years ago 'the family lair'. Apparently, that's where one of the more affluent members of a family bought a plot in the graveyard, and several of his relations were also laid to rest in it. They would be stacked six or more deep. But the important aspect is that that facility would only be available to close relations. It seemed that his brother had purchased this plot, so now that Liz had this link, it opened up a whole new line of enquiry, and she was able to get back another three generations to a chap called William. She's examining his will to see if it offers any clues."

"Presumably that gets your family tree back to the mid-sixteen hundreds?" asked Adrian.

Elise nodded. “To 1661. It’s really fascinating. Seemingly, that’s before Scotland and England joined. They were separate countries.”

“Yes, the union of the Parliaments was in 1707. The Stuarts became monarchs of both countries in 1603, but their Parliaments remained independent till then. Queen Anne came to the throne in 1702 and was the last of that dynasty. It was her pet project to unite her two realms properly.”

Elise smiled. “You really do know a lot about history, don’t you.”

“Yes, it’s one of the things I’m very interested in. Another is you, obviously.”

“Oh, obviously,” she replied, laughing. “Anyway, I scuttled over to the charity you suggested. It was amazing. They do exactly as you said. They had arranged for a young player to come in and demonstrate five instruments to me, and I must say she was brilliant. I had no idea that violins could sound so different.”

“It’s an incredible instrument. When used by a top-level soloist, it can be extremely passionate, yet has the power to project many other emotions above the sound of the accompanying orchestra. What piece did she play?” he asked.

“It was a section of the first movement of Mendelssohn’s violin concerto. I was entranced.”

“That’s a beautiful one,” he replied. “But did you buy anything?”

“Yes. In the end it was a choice between an Amati, a Guarneri and a Stradivarius. Each one had a big sound, but I ditched the Amati quite quickly. I liked both the Guarneri and the Strad. The Guarneri had a tighter sound, and the Strad was looser, but both were powerful as well as sweet.”

“Stop teasing me,” said Adrian. “What did you decide to do?”

“If you’d stop interrupting me, I’d tell you. I couldn’t decide at first, but eventually settled on the Guarneri. I loved the sound of both, and wanted to buy the two, but I have some cash flow problems again because of that project which is overspent, which meant I didn’t have quite enough.”

“Oh, that’s a huge shame. You must have been very disappointed, but the youngster who borrows the violin will be very lucky.”

“A bit more than that,” replied Elise sheepishly. “I look forward to you coming with me to listen to it being played in concerts. Apparently, it’s an integral part of the scheme that I am invited to the various performances

that it's involved in. Anyway, what's been happening here? I'll get Peter to update me properly tomorrow, but maybe you could give me a summary now?"

"Quite a lot has happened in the five days you've been away. Do you remember Tom?"

"Yes, he's the old chap who rents one of the cottages."

"Well, I'm afraid he's died. Sorry."

Elise went quiet for another moment. "What a shame. He was lovely, and very nice to me. He used to send me a bunch of flowers every year on the anniversary of his wife's death. I think we had quite a close bond between us, although I'm not sure why."

Adrian leaned over and kissed her again. "There was no question about it," he answered. "The kindness you showed him and Olive in her last days had a big effect on him."

"Oh, that was nothing. All I did was pay a few bills."

"Well, he obviously appreciated the way you tried to help. He left everything he owned to you in his will."

Elise had been reclining lazily on the settee, but on hearing this, she shot upright and turned to stare at Adrian.

After a couple of minutes, she sighed. "It can't have been much, and I certainly didn't deserve that. And the worst is that I can't say thank you to him."

"Well, you could. In a way. Why not make sure he gets a really good funeral? You could invite any of his army pals that are still alive too."

"I didn't know he was in the army?"

"Not only that, but he was a hero. He fought at Monte Cassino in 1944. It was one of the bloodiest battles. The Germans held a monastery at the top of a mountain, and the Allies lost tens of thousands of men in trying to take it. He won a medal for incredible bravery there. That, and the written citation that accompanies it, are part of your inheritance."

"To think that someone like that was living in one of my cottages. He never said a word about it. And in those dreadful conditions too. I think I'll donate his medal to his regimental museum. That would be fitting. But for now, I need to go upstairs to lie down. Hearing about poor Tom has made me feel a bit ill," she said.

“Heroes rarely do talk about their exploits. But before you go, there’s one more thing you need to know.”

Adrian watched as Elise gulped.

“Don’t worry. It’s not more bad news, so you needn’t look pale,” he said, and reached over to put his arm round her.

“I have a terrible sense of foreboding about this. Have you found someone else while I’ve been away?” she whispered.

“You idiot,” he responded. “I’ve never been unfaithful to anyone, and have no intention of starting.”

Her head was leaning against his shoulder, and she turned it to kiss him again. “Thank goodness for that. I had to go up to the city. That business wouldn’t wait, but you are so good looking that I was terrified that you might attract someone else while I was away.”

“You won’t get rid of me that easily. Anyway, I need to tell you something else. I found another item in Tom’s house which now belongs to you. His employer obviously knew about his fetish for Single Malt Scottish Whisky, and gave him a bottle when he retired. It’s not certain what it is because there isn’t a proper label. The only thing is a hand-written note that’s been glued to the glass, which gives his company’s thanks for all the years of faithful service, and hopes he thinks of them when he drinks the liquid which it states is a Macallan 1926 60 year old. I came across another one a while ago when I was sorting out a client’s tax affairs. He bought it at auction for £1.2 million. But afterwards he had it checked to make sure it was genuine.”

“I can understand that,” replied Elise. “That’s a lot of money to spend on a fake. But what did he do?”

“He paid a university in Scotland to carry out a test using their new laser technology. In trials of the machine, the results proved to be 100% accurate. The beam shines through the glass, and in passing it takes a reading of the details of the liquid inside. Only forty of these bottles were produced from the original cask, but one has been missing for many years. This could be it, so I suggest that you have them do something similar on this one.”

“That’s unbelievable. I’ve always thought whisky was meant to be drunk. Why would this one be worth so much?”

“It’s amazing how much I was able to learn from my client about this, and it’s very interesting, actually. After whisky is distilled, it’s left to mature in a wooden barrel for several years. In the case of yours, sixty years, and it was matured in cask 263. I think they’d forgotten about it,

and only discovered it at the back of their warehouse by accident. The problem is that the timber lets some of the liquid out over time through evaporation. It's called 'the Angel's Share'. After sixty years, there wouldn't have been much left. Or to be precise, only enough to make 40 bottles. So, it's partly the rarity that adds to this whisky's value."

Elise looked thoughtful for a while. "How many bottles would there have been before the evaporation?"

"Many hundreds."

She sat up again. "Yes, I think it would be worth having the Scottish university carry out the test. I'll get onto it tomorrow. In the meantime, I feel quite worn out. Shall we go upstairs?"

"Of course, but it might be some time till you can get any sleep. I mean, you have been away for several days. We've got a lot of catching up to do."

Chapter 30.

As he sat in the lounge again, Adrian luxuriated in the experience of sinking into the deeply filled cushions of the arm chair. He reflected on how the light brown of the expensive carpet provided a soothing feeling, and allowed him to appreciate the view through the French doors more easily. Elise was out there having a discussion with Jacob about a different planting arrangement for next Spring. Adrian could vaguely hear the conversation, and was intrigued when she proposed changing a small grass meadow into a field of daffodils for the following year, to create a blanket of yellow, enlivened with the dots of purple, red and orange provided by intermittent tulips. After a few minutes of animated conversation things went quiet, and Adrian could see that Elise was standing thoughtfully as she considered Jacob's suggestion that the area be left to grow free for the benefit of insects and other wildlife.

Adrian looked up at the blue sky. At first, as he had sat down he had winced at the sun's rays being reflected at him from the glass top of the nearby teak coffee table. However, his vision had eventually settled, and he now watched the puffs of white clouds as they slowly moved across the scene. Obviously, there was a gentle wind at that altitude that kept them in motion, but his mind imagined that they were alive, and were casually crossing the vast expanse of the firmament en route to oversee some distant exotic holiday destination.

His thoughts moved onto his relationship with Elise. He was amazed at how quickly he had fallen for her, after all of the other dreadful experiences he'd endured recently. He had been at the lowest ebb he had ever known, and hadn't been able to contemplate how he would ever make enough of a recovery to allow him to return to work; and then she'd appeared out of thin air in the coffee shop and scooped him up.

He'd known four ladies in quick succession, including Jemima, who had betrayed the very trust that was vital for a relationship to survive. Lucy had been calm and reassuring, but had lacked a great deal of confidence. Rachel was full of life and survived for the moment, which had ultimately brought about the end of their romance. Elise's quiet self-assurance had oozed into his pores and permitted him to commence the journey of reclaiming his health and happiness. She'd even allowed him to start the process of moving on from the tragic exit of Lucy from his life; a feat he never expected to happen.

There was one problem, of course. His time with her was extremely beneficial to his recuperation, but he would eventually need to return to work. It seemed impossible that his resilience could improve to the extent that that would be possible, and yet he had to earn a living somehow. That meant going back to the office and spending long hours poring over successive clients' affairs.

And yet, was there any alternative? What other skills did he possess? He had spent so many years training to work in his current profession, and he had definitely achieved a great deal of success. Well, in a material sense, that was, but what about his personal life. It had previously all been wrapped up in his anticipated future with Jemima, but her action had proved how fragile plans were when shared with someone else.

The ringing sound firmly asserted its existence, bringing Adrian's thoughts back to the lounge and the call he was making. After a few minutes, the outgoing voice message kicked in, instructing the caller to leave a message after the tone.

"Hi Shaun, its Adrian. I've tried several times but haven't been able to get through. Are you alright? I'm getting really worried about you. Please could you phone me, even if it's only to let me know everything is okay. I think you've already got my number, but I'll give it to you now; 07739-260214. Hopefully we'll speak soon."

He got to his feet and wandered out to join Elise in the garden. He watched as Jacob nodded his head once, turned and walked away towards the estate office, which was at the other side of the garage complex where Elise kept her collection of cars. She definitely had some beauties, he mused, and their value must be enormous. The MGA was his favourite. Perhaps he might be allowed a spin in it.

"Did you get through?" asked Elise.

"No, I got that wretched voicemail again."

"I'm really sorry about that. If you'd managed to speak to him, it might have helped you feel at peace, or at least to come more to terms with Lucy's passing."

"I'm getting quite anxious, actually. I care about him, and would feel a little better to hear whether he's alright. I thought we had established a good relationship before Lucy died, but this silence from him makes me wonder if I imagined that."

Elise came over and enveloped him in her arms. "I can't believe that's true, from what you've told me. Given how happy he was that you and Lucy planned to spend your future together, there must have been a decent bond between you both."

Adrian sighed. "I guess you're right. But I'd still like to hear how he is."

"I know," she responded. "Look, let's go inside. I've had some news which might cheer you up a little."

They wandered in, and Elise used the internal phone system to ask the footman to bring some coffee. She smiled. “It won’t be as good as yours, but it’ll have to do.”

“Oh, stop winding me up, and tell me this important, life shattering news.”

Elise laughed. “Do you remember the bottle of whisky I sent away to be tested by the Scottish university?”

Adrian’s sat upright in his seat. “Have they come back to you?”

“I thought it might grab your attention. Yes, and it’s good news. They’ve confirmed what you suspected. It’s the missing bottle of Macallan 1926 60 year old. There was absolutely no doubt. The test confirmed the age of the liquid, the various ingredients and its structure. Apparently, it would be delicious to drink, although I have no intention of removing the seal and cap to try.”

“Phew! For a moment I was starting to get worried that you would. When do you get it back?”

Elise laughed once more. “I’ve never really enjoyed whisky, actually, so it would be a complete waste. They said they’ll send it back in the next few days.”

“So, what are you going to do with it? You’ve already got collections of artwork and cars. Will you start a whisky one? After all, you’ve got plenty of space here, so you wouldn’t have to make too many alterations to construct the perfect storage conditions.”

Elise went silent for a moment, obviously giving the matter some thought. “No, I don’t think so. Anyway, what if it gets dropped. All that money would be lost. I think I’d like to sell it.”

It was Adrian’s turn to go quiet. “That seems a shame. From what some of my clients have said, bottles at that level are so rare that they are excellent long-term investments.”

Elise nodded thoughtfully. “Yes, I can see what you mean. But there is a difference. I appreciate my paintings for a number of reasons; the pictures themselves; as illustrations of the artists’ skills; and particularly the whole back story of the culture that produced such breathtaking works. I enjoy the lines of my cars; the engineering involved to produce them; and I definitely get a buzz when I take them out for a spin, even if it’s only around the estate. No modern vehicle gets that growl from their engines. The problem is that I don’t like whisky, so I don’t have the special feeling about it that is important to a collector.”

“Hang on a sec,” responded Adrian, and he spent the next few minutes scrolling through various screens on his phone. Eventually he placed it on the coffee table next to him. “I’ve just done a search of the main auction websites to find out what the latest sales values for it have been. It seems that the average is around £1.4 million. There would be the auction house’s commission and tax to deduct from that, but will still be a lot of money.”

“I remember you mentioned that kind of value to me before.”

“So, what do you think you might do with the extra cash that a sale would give you?”

“I was extremely impressed with the various violins I heard, and was very disappointed that I couldn’t get the Stradivarius as well as the Guarneri. Do you remember that I said that I didn’t have enough to buy both at the time?”

“Yes,” he replied. “Is that what you plan to do with the money?”

“Yes, I think so. It was such a beautiful instrument, and it has a very different sound from the one I have already agreed to purchase. I think they would compliment each other really well. Imagine having both played at the same concert. That would be great fun.”

“The youngsters who borrow both violins will be very lucky. I look forward to hearing them being played in the good acoustics of a concert hall.”

Elise smiled. “I have an idea. The first time we go to hear them being performed, why don’t we make the most of it, and stay in a really good hotel near the venue. We’ve never used a four-poster bed before!”

Adrian pretended to be thoughtful for a moment. “Hmmm. That’s true. But do we have to wait? Surely the ones upstairs have their uses?”

“What about the coffee? It’ll get cold.”

“I think that’s a price you might have to pay to have a little instant fun. I’ll just have to make you some of mine afterwards to compensate.”

Chapter 31.

Adrian watched as the footman cleared the breakfast table. It had been another gastronomic extravaganza. The chef certainly knew how to help his patrons start a new day with a boost. There were a range of meats, different cheeses, some croissants, cereal, toast, orange juice and a huge pot of coffee. In fact, there was always far too much, and a great deal was eventually removed uneaten. Maybe it would be a good idea for Elise to suggest that the mini banquet be curtailed a little.

Elise had just popped into a neighbouring room to take a business call, and Adrian sighed as he pondered the conversation he'd had with Josh over the phone the previous evening. There was no question that his boss had been perfectly supportive up until now, and hadn't hesitated to offer more time off work if Adrian thought it was needed, but the timing was the notable factor. Josh had slipped into the chat that there was an important conference coming up and there was no-one who could attend.

The topic that the event covered would be of interest, he reflected: 'The moral case for using offshore trusts and offshore companies to conceal a client's wealth,' although he knew that some presentations would inevitably be made on other, related themes. Josh had forwarded the guest list and there were a number of speakers that Adrian knew would present compelling points on both sides of the argument. There was definitely a great deal of pressure from clients to use these kinds of tools to reduce the risk to their capital from government taxation as well as other things such as damages assessed against wealth in law suits. And the venue was perfect. It was on the ground floor of a building about three blocks from his normal place of employment.

"Thanks for waiting for me," said Elise as she re-entered the breakfast room. "There's been another problem with the project. A really big one, so I need to return to the city. I think it'll be for several days this time, perhaps a week. And I'll need to liaise with my professional advisers, particularly those that deal with the overseas aspects. We might run foul of a couple of foreign jurisdictions too. How did your call yesterday evening go, by the way? You never did tell me."

"It was Josh, my boss. He offered me more time off if I needed it, but, thanks to your support, I feel that I've made a good recovery. He mentioned that there is an important conference coming up in a couple of days, and hinted that he'd like me to attend if I was up to it as there's no-one else available. I'd like to go."

Elise reached over and clasped his hand. "Are you sure? I'm glad you're feeling a lot better, but shouldn't you take a little more time to make certain? I mean, you have been through some very serious trauma."

Adrian nodded his head. “I’d like to give it a go. Your estate is a beautiful place, but I feel like a spare part around here. I’d like to get my teeth into something substantial.”

“I guess I can understand that, but you shouldn’t underestimate how useful you’ve been down here. You’ve uncovered my previous agent’s fraudulent activities, identified that rather expensive bottle of whisky and introduced me to an excellent new charity. And I’m still worried about you.”

Adrian smiled at her. “I have fallen for you deeply, and I don’t know what I’d have done without you. You’ve really looked after me, and being here has been of enormous help. I suppose I still feel a little fragile, but I’ve got to go back sometime, and this seems like an easy way to do that. The only attendees are representatives from various professional firms that work in this area, so there won’t be any clients. That’ll significantly reduce any stress.”

Elise went silent for a moment, obviously giving the matter some thought. “Well, perhaps you should stay with me in my apartment, then I can keep an eye on you. And, I’ve had an idea in case you can’t cope with your previous high-pressure environment. You could come and work with me full time.”

Adrian leaned over and they shared a hug. “Thank you,” he whispered. “But I can’t see how that would work. What happens if we end up disagreeing? I really don’t want to lose you.”

Elise shook her head. “There is no risk of that. Firstly, I thought we could run the overall business as a partnership, so we’d be equals. And then we’d have our separate responsibilities underneath that. I’d take care of the investment side, and you could run all of the other stuff like accounting, tax, legal matters etc. And there would be plenty for you to do as I plan to expand my business interests into new countries, particularly southern Africa. We could see these new parts of the world together.”

“That sounds like fun. I might take you up on it if plan A doesn’t work out. I won’t be able to stay with you, though, as delegates are expected to use their accommodation at the venue.”

“Hmmm, I see. I suppose it’ll be easier for you to mingle with colleagues in the bar, and then stagger to your room afterwards. Okay. How long will it be for?”

“Three days, and then I’ll stay at your apartment afterwards, if you don’t mind?”

“I might be persuaded, if you’re nice to me beforehand,” replied Elise.

“Oh, well, back to the coal face. You really are insatiable.”

“It’s taken you a long time to understand that, but finally you seem to be getting there!” she answered, smiling.

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Adrian sat on the edge of his bed and looked around his room. It certainly was extremely comfortable, but then he wouldn’t have expected anything else from such a luxurious hotel. The bed seemed to mould itself into the contours of his body perfectly; he sank into the pile in the lush brown carpets as he crossed the chamber; the bathroom items were of marble and the fittings all gave a strong impression of being solid gold. But the views from the windows in daylight were amazing. He was in a bedroom on the top floor of the tower block, and the unrestricted vista over the roof tops to the countryside beyond was spectacular, the green and brown of the distant fields contrasting with the drab grey of the city.

His mind roved onto the hall where all of the events were being held. It certainly was large. The dark grey curtains at the front of the stage framed the vast area of the platform, which was so huge that the presenters seemed to almost disappear behind the lectern. Luckily the microphones and accompanying equipment provided decent amplification to allow the listeners to follow their arguments adequately. The seats in which the audience sat banked upwards, and he estimated that they probably allowed the attendance of at least 500 people. And of great help were the images of the speakers’ notes that were projected onto the rear wall.

This was the end of the middle day of the three, and there had certainly been a number of useful speeches so far. Yesterday’s first one had opened the whole event by outlining some of the options that were available to clients in various jurisdictions. Some Caribbean countries offered especially attractive regimes in which the local governments allowed a large degree of anonymity to wealthy individuals’ financial arrangements. Of course, they all offered alternatives which aimed to minimise tax, some of which involved establishing a company that provided a shell in which all of the investments could be placed. The shares of this corporate entity would be held within a trust structure in another country where the settlor, or person paying the money in, could also benefit from the provisions of that arrangement. This led to fiscal efficiency as well as a high degree of invisibility to inquisitive national authorities.

Yet, there were many more features that could be used to help clients. One person had even humorously suggested that a suitcase full of banknotes being stored under the bed was the most effective method to avoid officials discovering wealth. The delegates had howled with laughter, until someone in the auditorium loudly asked what precautions

would be taken to avoid the boodle being burned should the house catch fire.

A series of seminars about the latest efforts to prevent money laundering was also very useful. Adrian was pleased that there was a general consensus that these provisions were vital to avoid the legitimisation of the proceeds of crime, such as from the narcotics or human trafficking trades. He'd spent many hours trying to persuade clients of the need for such rules.

And then there were the symposiums on the usefulness of acquiring the citizenship of multiple countries to enhance the ability to conduct business across borders. Some of the more amenable schemes were outlined, in which such a status could be obtained for the payment of a fee. Adrian smiled. Well, actually, in some cases a very large fee. Yet, it meant that travel to and from those places was unrestricted, and a stay could be extended should the need arise, without the bureaucracy involved in altering a visa.

He had come up to his room for a rest after the last session of the day, ordering a meal from room service instead of joining everyone else in the restaurant. He cast back to his arrival at the venue, and mused on how he had thought that he was ready for the challenges that inevitably presented themselves when attending a conference. The peace at Elise's estate had been wonderful, and he had regained a great deal of his confidence by helping her in such issues as were faced by her tenants, including unmasking the fraudulent agent. Yet, the concentration needed in the last two days at the conference had been very tiring, and the intermittent naps in his room had been vital.

However, this was the last evening, and in order to gain any benefit from the networking possibilities that the event offered, he needed to descend to the bar to mingle with everyone else. He rose and took a jacket out of the wardrobe. He wanted to dress relatively smartly, but not overly much, so he put it on and looked in the full-length mirror that hung to one side. Perhaps it looked a bit too formal, so he tried another. No, that clashed slightly with his trousers, but the third one seemed fine so he closed the doors on the rest of his suits and shirts and left for the lift.

The bar was packed, some people involved in intense conversations, others laughing at shared jokes. The room's décor was similar to many others he had spent time in when away on business. The long counter from where drinks were served had alcoves behind it in which the various beverages were stored, and gave the impression of being constructed of an expensive wood, but was obviously a cheaper substitute. Shame, he thought, when other areas of the establishment exuded genuinely luxurious fittings.

He smiled. The walls were covered in a light brown material, with a texture that was similar to a spider's web, a pattern that was presumably unintentionally mimicked by the cross-hatching on the dark fawn carpet. There were groupings of chairs and tables scattered in clumps around the sides at which lounged a number of the attendees, jackets open and ties undone.

His thoughts were interrupted by one of the delegates. "Hi mate, where have you been? Tonight's meal was really good, particularly the steak. It was very tender."

"Sorry, Alfie. I was a bit tired, so I ordered room service and then had a nap up there. How's your legal firm getting on? You specialise in UK commercial law, don't you?"

"It's very good actually. Recently we attached ourselves to a firm of international investment analysts, and they have been introducing clients to us who have overseas exposure. So, we decided to establish a new department to cope with that."

"You must have had trouble recruiting enough really good people. There aren't many with top level experience in that field of law."

"Oh, so true, my friend. We approached a couple of specialist agencies, but they couldn't find anyone. Then our head of HR mentioned that she'd seen an advert in the monthly magazine of her professional body. A new outfit had just started up, so we gave them a try, and they came up trumps. They introduced us to a fantastic lady who's now thankfully leading our international department. It was a bit of a promotion for her, but she really is excellent. But she puts the rest of us to shame by working much longer hours. Let me introduce you to her.

Alfie swung round and tapped the lady behind him on the shoulder. She turned round, and started to hold out her hand in greeting, then stopped. After a moment's silence she said, "hello, Adrian. How are you?"

"So, you two know each other, do you?" said Alfie. "It really is a small world. I'll leave you to catch up. There's someone over there I need to talk to anyway." And with that, he pushed his way through the crowd towards the far end of the room.

"Are you alright?" asked Jemima. "You've gone pale."

He stood staring at the person with whom he'd once hoped to have children, and then spend the rest of his life wallowing in a loving family. He'd never considered that she'd be here. When they'd split up, she hadn't been senior enough to attend a function like this, so he'd thought he'd be safe. He wouldn't have come along if there had been even the

slightest risk. And now here she was, and he felt his mouth go dry and his heart turn summersaults.

“S… S… Sorry,” he replied. “I didn’t expect you to be here.”

“The same here. I’d heard you had taken our split really badly and were on extended leave because of it. I wouldn’t have come along if I’d known you’d be here in case I made you worse.”

Adrian felt the room shrink and the walls close in, and started to find it difficult to breathe. “You… You… You’re right. I have been off, but I thought I’d recovered enough to see if I could return to work. This seemed like an easy way to check.”

“And now I’ve ruined that, haven’t I?” she asked.

“I don’t know what to say,” he whispered. “I guess you must think that I’m pathetic, taking time off under those circumstances. But I loved you with my whole soul, and thought we had a solid future together. Then I saw that text arrive on your phone from someone called Doug, saying that he wished you’d had another night together at that conference. And then when you left without an explanation, I thought that was an admission of guilt. I completely collapsed.”

Jemima gave him a watery smile. “You really are silly. I’m sorry about the way I behaved, but I was so deeply upset that you could suspect me of infidelity that I couldn’t bring myself to explain. The truth is that Doug worked for the firm I work for now. He was trying to persuade me to join his firm, but I refused. It would have meant being away on business more, and I didn’t want that as we would have been apart for longer periods. He hoped that the conference could have lasted another night so that he had more time to try and convince me. Nothing more. I was always faithful to you.”

The tears started to roll down Adrian’s cheeks. “You promise?” he asked.

“Of course. I don’t suppose you’ll remember, but shortly after we met on that joint project between our two firms all those years ago, I told you how much I loved you. In fact, I haven’t been able to look at anyone else since we split up because I still do.”

“I can’t believe it,” he replied. “So, you haven’t even dated anybody else?”

“No. Several men have asked me out, but I’ve turned them all down. If you must know, the thought of being with another guy has made me feel physically sick.”

Adrian shook his head slowly. “Oh, Jemima. We’ve both been through hell because of a misunderstanding.”

“I don’t think you’ll be able to cope on your own tonight. You seem to be in a really bad state, but it’s clear to me that we still love each other. Shall I spend the night with you? We can help each other.”

“I’ve dreamed of hearing you say that. But, so much has happened since you left my flat. I need some time to think. Can we chat again tomorrow? My head’s spinning so I think I’ll go to bed now. Please be patient with me.”

“Of course,” and she reached out and squeezed his hand. “I’ve waited all this time, so although it will be difficult, I can wait another night.”

“I love you,” he whispered.

“I love you too, darling.”

Chapter 32.

Adrian's thoughts were interrupted by the sound of footsteps in the corridor outside his room as someone went passed. He looked at the time on his phone. It was now quite late, and he'd been trying to get to sleep for an hour, but had totally failed because his mind had been violently turning things over. He couldn't help running through the memories of the incredible life he'd shared with Jemima before he'd seen the text from Doug.

Of course, there were the wonderful visits they'd made to the hotel on their anniversaries. The king sized four poster bed was definitely well used, as was the large spa in the bathroom. The bubbles seemed to get everywhere, and he was always intoxicated by Jemima's laugh when they tickled her somewhere intimate. And, of course, the meals they'd ordered through room service were delicious, inevitably consumed with an expensive bottle of wine they always managed to buy from somewhere.

Then there was the time they went to a practice ski slope which was located on the side of a big hill just outside the city they lived in. They had hired all the skis, boots, poles, helmets and pads they required to cover their elbows, knees and heads, and put everything on after reaching the top of the incline. This wasn't the first time they'd been there, but they hadn't tried to descend on their own without the attention of an instructor before. They had initially gone slowly, but even at that speed Jemima had fallen over. That prompted her to try again, this time challenging Adrian to a race to the bottom. They both managed to reach their goal at the same time, giggling all the way down when they both toppled. He smiled. Well, at least they had only sustained scratches.

Then the vision appeared of their adventure in Seychelles. The sun was incredibly hot, and they'd both received sun burn, despite wearing clothing on all of their arms and legs, donning wide brimmed hats and covering themselves in a high factor sun cream. They'd gone on an organised trip to visit a tea plantation on the side of the hill that runs down the length of Mahé, the main island, and for a short time had ended up helping the workers to collect the plants. On another occasion they'd taken a trip far out to sea with a group of others to go snorkelling. They were amazed by the colours and varieties of fish that swam beneath the surface. And, of course, the evening meals were taken on the veranda of the hotel's restaurant. After they'd finished eating, they'd watch the ball fall from the sky in a blaze of deep reds, surrounded by a glow of yellows, and imagined that it was enveloped by the sea as it disappeared below the horizon. Yet, he knew he'd never forget the pinnacle of their vacation, which was a short trip for three nights to a remote island at the distant end of the archipelago, and for most of that stay it was so quiet that they felt as if they could almost be the only people on the planet. They slept in a straw hut which had a gap between the top of the walls and the roof to

let the refreshing nighttime air in. Hand in hand they wandered along the white sanded beach that wrapped around the atoll, the palm trees that lined the shore swaying in a wonderfully cooling breeze. They rested next to the one hundred and fifty year old turtle, Ezmerelda, enjoying ice cold drinks as they listened to the peaceful and satisfying sound as she munched on some fruit. They sat in the surf, feeling the warm Indian Ocean waves buffet against their bodies.

The most important moment, though, was when he'd taken her to the theatre to see a ballet on Valentine's day. The show was Tchaikovsky's 'Nutcracker', and they'd cuddled up tightly together in the dark in shared awe each time the dancers performed something else spectacular, often appearing to defy gravity when they pirouetted. After the performance had ended, he'd led her by the hand into the bar, bought two glasses of champagne, and in front of the crowds had gone on one knee and proposed. The loud cheer from the others when she'd accepted had been deafening.

And then, for no apparent reason, his mind returned to the moment he'd discovered the devastating text. He remembered how everything that he had valued had seemed to vanish in a puff of smoke, leaving the teenage dreams of how he'd hoped his life would unfold as mere memories: meeting a beautiful and enchanting lady to whom he could devote his very being for eternity.

Perhaps he shouldn't have glanced at her phone when it pinged. Then he might still be in the relationship that had meant everything to him. Instead, something appeared to have taken hold of him: he'd found that he couldn't control his actions, and after his chat shortly afterwards with his friend, Alan, couldn't stop himself wandering through to the dining table where she was sitting after they'd finished another meal and asking her whether she'd been unfaithful. He remembered feeling his heart burst and his mind explode with the intensity of the moment as she quietly rose from her seat and left the flat.

And now he knew that she hadn't been unfaithful to him at all, and still felt as strongly for him as she had during their romance. He had spent the last months progressing through one tragic relationship after another, one lady being murdered, another having an affair with her best friend, and now he was seeing a client. How could that end in any other way than disaster! It seemed that all the barriers to the resumption of his relationship with Jemima had been removed and they could resume their joint passion.

The ringing sound from his phone tore his thoughts from their fevered trajectory, so he turned the nearby light on, picked it up from the bedside table and looked at the number. He didn't recognise it, so he pressed the 'connect' button. "Hello? Who's speaking please?"

“My name is Nora. I’m Shaun’s sister. I hope I haven’t caught you at a bad time.”

Adrian sat up and moved to the edge of the bed. “No, it’s fine.”

“I’m sorry I haven’t been in touch earlier. I received your earlier messages on Shaun’s phone, but I couldn’t find your number to return the call until you left it on the last one.”

Adrian started to shake again. Why would Shaun’s sister be ringing? Surely it could only mean bad news of some kind. *Oh, no, not again. Would it never stop!*

“Why are you calling me now? Where is Shaun?”

“I’m afraid I’ve got some bad news.” Adrian breathed in deeply in anticipation. “Shaun died a few weeks ago,” she continued. “Before he went, he told me how close you were to my niece, Lucy, and how much he thought of you. He asked me to apologise to you for not being in contact, but he was too scared to do so. I think he was worried that hearing your voice would bring back too many memories.”

“I see. I have been really worried about him. What happened?” whispered Adrian, as the tears started to flow.

“At first, we went every day to Lucy’s grave to put flowers on it. It seemed to help him feel a little closer to her. But on the last occasion he had a heart attack, and after I phoned for an ambulance, he was rushed into hospital. He lingered for a couple of days, and it was then that he told me about your relationship with Lucy.”

“Yes, I was going to leave my job in the city, come and live with her and help around the farm. We wanted to share our futures.”

“Yes, Shaun mentioned that,” said Nora. “I’m really sorry.”

“What happened to Shaun then?” asked Adrian.

After two days he had another massive heart attack, and despite the best efforts of the hospital staff, he lapsed into a coma and died half an hour later. The doctor got to know Shaun in the days he was there, and learned about the passing of Shaun’s wife and then Lucy. He said that they’d have to put heart attack down as the official cause of Shaun’s death, but that in reality it would have been due to the twin trauma and stress of losing both his wife and daughter.”

“When is the funeral please? I’d like to go,” replied Adrian.

“I’m sorry, but it was held two weeks after Shaun passed.”

Adrian started to whimper, and rocked back and forth. “Are you alright?” asked Nora. “You sound dreadful.”

He swallowed, and took a deep breath. “Its just that I’ve undergone a lot of bad news recently, and hadn’t any thought that Shaun would have died. Look, I think I’d better go. I’m at a business conference at the moment, and there’s someone I want to go and see. Hopefully she’ll help me.”

“Okay,” answered Nora. “But if you want me for anything, please ring. My number will be imprinted on your phone now. There’s just one other thing that I need to tell you, although I’m not sure if you can deal with it right now. Shaun had no other family, apart from me. My husband and I live overseas, but we’ve been on an extended holiday in Scotland for a few weeks. That’s why you haven’t met us. We were travelling back down south to visit Shaun, and were nearly there when he called us with the news about Lucy. I went straight to the hospital, and got there very soon after the ambulance arrived. The thing is, we own a farm in the outback of Australia, and Shaun’s farm wouldn’t be any use to us. Shaun knew that, so he had his will changed, and he left it to you. It’s winter down under at the moment, so there’s nothing for us to do there, so we’re staying over in this country for a few more weeks to finish clearing up some last bits of his estate. We can continue to look after the land here until then, if you like.”

Adrian sat silently, blankly staring at the wall. The last person connected with his life with Lucy had gone. Would this dreadful stream of bad experiences ever end? Would everything he touched continue to disintegrate? Would his heart ever have the chance to recover so that he could have the strong and loving relationship with someone that he’d always wanted?

“Hello,” came Nora’s voice. “Are you still there?”

“Yes, sorry,” he whispered. “I’m rather overwhelmed at the moment. Yes, please, if you could continue to look after Shaun’s farm for me for the moment, I’d be very grateful.”

“That’s fine. We’ll ring you in plenty time before we are due to leave the UK, but you don’t have to worry for the moment. As I said, we’ll be here for several more weeks yet.” The line went quiet for a space. “Look,” continued Nora, “I’ll leave you to go and see your friend. Phone me when you’re ready.”

“Thanks,” he replied. “And also, thanks for letting me know.”

“Speak soon,” she said, and Adrian heard the line go dead. He went into the bathroom and looked in the mirror. His eyes were red and his hair

looked a little dishevelled. Those could be fixed, but it was the tremor of his hands that he couldn't stop. He tried to fill the glass provided by the hotel with water so he could take a drink, but he spilled as much as went into the glass due to the wobble, so he replaced it back on the shelf above the sink.

He really needed to see Jemima. She had said that she wanted to restart their relationship. When he'd had rough experiences in the past, she'd held him close and soothed away the pain. Surely, she would help now. Maybe she could do that again; if he could feel her lips on his forehead: if he could feel her hands run through his hair; if he could spend the night in her arms.

Yes, he decided that that would be the best course of action to take, but as he walked towards the door his phone rang again. He hesitated. Did he want to answer it? Surely the most important thing was to find Jemima. He couldn't take any more of this emotional turmoil without someone to support him. Yet, the machine continued to make an insistent noise, and had a similar effect that toddlers achieve with pester power. He had to get it.

He was keen to leave, so didn't look at the number that appeared on the screen as he pressed the 'connect' button again. "Adrian, its Elise. I've been getting really worried about you. I haven't heard from you for two days. I've rung before, but there's been no answer. Are you alright?"

He held the phone away from his ear for a moment, his cloudy and shattered brain trying to work out who Elise was, then returned it to its normal position. "Yes, sorry," he said shakily. "When I arrived, the receptionist said that all of the delegates were requested to turn their phone's off during the conference, so I've been leaving it in my room. Yes, I'm fine."

"You don't sound it. Has something happened?"

"Yes. Jemima's here," he garbled, "and I didn't know she was going to be, and I didn't see her for the first two days, and then she was introduced to me in the bar a couple of hours ago, and then Shaun's sister rang me to say he died a few weeks ago and he's left me his farm, and I think I'm going to be sick and then stick my head down the toilet and flush it. Maybe it'll drown me."

The line went quiet for a moment. "Oh, god," she said. "Where are you now?"

"In my room, but I was just going back to the bar. I suppose I should be mingling, although I don't know how the hell I'm going to do it."

“No, you’re not going to do that,” she insisted. “Listen to me. I want you to pack all your stuff. Get one of the porters to help you, if you need to. Then meet me outside the hotel. I’m going to pick you up and bring you back here.”

“Are you sure?” he whispered.”

“Don’t worry, honey. I’m going to look after you. When you’re better we can talk again about whether you’d like to come and work for me. But whatever you decide, it’s clear that you can’t go back to your accounting firm. It’s not good for your health.”

“Yes,” he stuttered. “I think you’re right.”

“I should be able to get there quite quickly. Get yourself downstairs, check out and I’ll meet you out front.”

“Thanks for helping me. You saved me once, and now you’re doing it again.”

“I love you, and want you for myself. Simple. See you in a few minutes,” and the line went dead.

Adrian didn’t remember packing his case, going down to reception or speaking to the gentleman behind the check-in desk. He felt like he was in a trance, and the world around him was progressing a totally separate path through time than he was. Other people were being born, forming romantic attachments and dying, and here he was, shuffling through a hotel in a daze.

He looked at the clock on the wall. Elise wouldn’t arrive for another ten minutes, so he decided to sit on one of the seats in the lounge in the reception area. He blankly looked around. There were huge glass windows at the front, with elaborate swinging doors to admit the clientele. A porter in the usual uniform, complete with matching blue top hat, was visible as he stood on the pavement just outside the entrance. The various chairs and settees dotted around the white walled space were filled with noisy and animated people, with waiters and their silver trays hovering to provide liquid refreshment to those who could afford the establishment’s superior prices.

A loud, indiscreet voice that belonged to a chap sitting a couple of yards away attracted his attention, and Adrian looked in the nearby windows to see the reflection of another male approaching the speaker. “Ah, there you are Doug. How did you get on?”

Another dull business conversation, thought Adrian, but it was the next comments that maintained his attention. “Everything was going fine, but

she changed her mind. We were due to meet in the bar, and then go back to her room again."

"Did you meet her here?" came the answer.

"No," replied Doug. "At the last conference a few months ago, and then because she recently split up with her partner, we've managed some weekends since then when my wife's been away. Our first time together was particularly wonderful, though. We spent three glorious nights together and I wished at the time that we'd had another one before returning to our other halves. Believe me when I say she's really hot in bed. She almost eats me alive. We slept together last night again, and were due to do the same tonight, but she changed her mind after dinner. She didn't tell me what caused it, but Alfie told me she met some chap from her past in the bar immediately after the meal."

"That's a shame. She's a real stunner. Hasn't she recently been hired to start that new international department at your firm, Glazeby and Newton?"

"Jemima. Yes. She made a good move there, but then she is fiercely talented and hyper intelligent."

Adrian almost fainted. His head spun and he wanted to throw up, but somehow managed to prevent that. In a daze he staggered to the entrance and pushed through the swivel doors. "Excuse me sir," said the porter, "I think you've forgotten your luggage. If you hang on a minute, I'll get it for you."

Chapter 33.

Adrian opened his eyes. Elise was lying next to him, but was still asleep. They were in the main bedroom at her apartment, and as he looked around it, he sighed in relief. It hadn't been a dream, after all. She had arrived just in time, before he had lost consciousness. By the time they had arrived back, he had returned to reality and Elise had helped him into the lift. He had leant against its wall as it monotonously clicked its way up to the correct floor.

He sighed again. All he could remember from the moment they left the hotel was what Elise told him afterwards. The porter had helped her to shovel him into her car; the porter had placed Adrian's suitcase into the boot; the traffic had been light and they had made the journey swiftly. He vaguely recalled her helping him get undressed before she shuffled him under the covers and curl up beside him.

Her voice brought him back from his thoughts. "Welcome home," she said. "How do you feel?"

"Numb."

"When I first saw you outside the hotel last night, you looked a lot worse than I imagined. Did something else happen before I arrived?"

Adrian breathed deeply. "I'm not sure I want to talk about it. It might bring even more living nightmares back to me if I do. Are you sure you want to know?"

"Yes. I've told you already that I love you and am going to look after you. I've loved you since that first moment I met you at your offices, all those months ago," she said, and started to smile, "although I didn't want to tell you before in case I made you big-headed."

Adrian reached over and pretended to hit her. "I wish you had, though. It would have made things a lot easier. You know, sort of released our inhibitions about expressing our emotions a lot quicker. In case there's any doubt, by the way, I love you too."

Elise laughed. "Now that's a really romantic way to tell me. And, no, there was no doubt. Actually, I knew when I first met you that there was a connection between us. Shame you had that girlfriend at the time. We could have got to know each other much sooner."

"That would have been good, as it turns out, but I didn't know it then."

"What do you mean?" asked Elise.

“I hoped that I was only dreaming it, but now I know that I wasn’t. I wouldn’t have reacted the way I did otherwise. You know, nearly fainting when you arrived. It seems that I was right all along. I bumped into her in the bar last night and she swore to me that she had been faithful, but she hadn’t. I heard a couple of chaps discussing it in the foyer whilst I was waiting for you.”

“The bitch.”

“You have no idea how much better I feel by having you lying next to me. In the ring on my side, if you see what I mean. It’s a huge contrast to when I first discovered her infidelity. I had no-one then. And now I’ve got a beautiful lady who I know that I love, and who loves me.”

Elise rolled over and put her arm over his chest. “You wanted to return to your firm. What do you want to do now?”

He turned his head to look at her. “I want to be with you. That’s it. Nothing else.”

“You do realise that my business activities will mean we’re apart quite a bit, don’t you? Especially with my new overseas ventures.”

“Yes,” he answered. “Would that be different if we worked together?”

“Of course. I’d need my business adviser and partner near me at all times.”

“Then I think that’s what we need to do. When do I start, boss?”

When they both stopped laughing, Adrian felt her hand descend below the duvet cover, and his mind started to turn summersaults, but this time in an extremely pleasurable way. “Right now,” she answered.